

Endangered Minds

Recently, my twelfth-grade students were reading *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and as part of the unit, I had given them two editorials—one arguing that the United States should immediately withdraw from Iraq, the other arguing that the “surge” strategy was working and that America should stay and fight. As a first step to making meaning from the articles, I had provided the students with highlighters and directions to highlight anything that confused them on their first-draft reading. After they identified their confusion, students collaborated in groups to work through their rough spots. Circulating through the room, I noticed Marissa and Justine struggling with a passage they both had highlighted as a trouble spot.

“Mr. Gallagher, can you help us?” Marissa asked as I approached.

“What’s troubling you?” I replied.

“Neither one of us gets this part,” Justine explained, pointing to the passage that both girls had highlighted. “We don’t get what it means when it mentions ‘the lifeblood of al Qaeda.’”

“What do you think it might mean?” I replied. “Look at the context of the sentence.”

“How should we know?” Marissa said. “We don’t even know who this Al guy is.”

“Yes,” Justine added. “Who is this Al guy?”

I wanted to smile but, fortunately, caught myself in time when I realized they were not pulling my leg. Both of these students—both high school seniors, both old enough to vote in the upcoming presidential election—thought “Al” Qaeda was a person. At that time, the United States had been at war for five and a half years, and here were two students, two young adults leaving the educational system, who had never heard of al Qaeda. Both, by the way, had passed the multiple-choice reading section of the state’s high school exit exam.

The “Al” Qaeda anecdote is not an isolated incident. At the time I was writing this book, for example, the 2008 presidential primaries were unfolding; yet, out of my thirty-eight freshman students, only one student could identify John McCain, John Edwards, Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, or Rudy Giuliani. Perhaps more unbelievable was that only one of my ninth graders could name the sitting vice president of the United States. Worse, only six of my 100 seniors—again, people old enough to vote—could identify Dick Cheney. This is not a problem found only in urban California schools. I shared this story with a group of teachers in Northern Virginia, just a few minutes from Washington, D.C., and one government teacher said that only five of his seniors could identify the vice president. Only five from a group of high school seniors living in the shadow of the nation’s capital! Despite this, my guess is that most of his students also passed their state reading exams.

Something is seriously wrong with this picture.

Students Need Authentic Reading

I literally wrote this paragraph 35,000 feet above Arizona. It was a beautiful day, and the pilot had just announced that passengers sitting on the right-hand side of the plane would have a “spectacular” view of the Grand Canyon. Unfortunately, I was sitting on the left-hand side of the plane, straining to see any hint of the natural wonder outside my window. My window was too narrow, so I missed the show.

I couldn’t help but wonder whether my flight would be an apt metaphor for what is happening to our students. They were receiving a heavy dose of reading but through a narrow window. They could see the upcoming tests through the window, of course, but in narrowing their reading experiences to focus on test preparation, we were ensuring they would miss the larger show. By gearing students year in and year out to practice for state-mandated reading exams, we had begun producing high school seniors (students who now had numerous years of testing focus) who had passed their reading tests but were leaving our schools without the cultural literacy needed to be productive citizens in a democratic

society. They could “bubble” in the correct answers, but to mix the metaphor, they were unaware what was happening on the other side of the airplane. This raises an alarming question: Can we afford to graduate students who are so intensely geared toward reading exams that they leave our schools never having had the opportunity to look out the other reading windows?

This chapter will argue that our students are in desperate need of large doses of authentic reading—the kinds of reading we, as adults, do in newspapers, magazines, blogs, and websites. These doses need to come from a mix of reading experiences, from longer, challenging novels and works of nonfiction to “lighter” recreational reading. Our students should be reading through many windows, not just a single, narrow window that gives them a view of the next exam.

The first step in broadening our students’ reading windows comes when we recognize the three factors that serve as major contributors to readicide:

1. There is a dearth of interesting reading materials in our schools.
2. Many schools have removed novels and other longer challenging works to provide teachers and students with more test preparation time.
3. Students are not doing enough reading in school.

This chapter will examine each of these factors and conclude with specific suggestions on how to turn the tide of readicide. Let’s begin with the first and most important factor.

Readicide Factor: There Is a Dearth of Interesting Reading Materials in Our Schools

I was channel surfing in a hotel one evening when I came across a documentary about America’s most underrated athlete, Olympic champion swimmer Michael Phelps. Though I don’t know much about competitive swimming, I found the show fascinating. Swimmers at that level of competition work out for hours every day, week after week, month after month, year after year, to get to a single race where the difference between gold and silver is often one one-hundredth of a second. Amazing. As I was watching the gold medal race, the eight swimmers were desperately churning, neck and neck, to be the first to touch the wall. Now remember, I do not know much about swimming, but as they were driving to the finish line, I was struck by an idea: each swimmer, long before that Olympic race, had daily access to a pool. I am overstating the obvious, I know, but it helps to

raise a key point when it comes to readicide. An Olympic swimmer swims hundreds of thousands of laps before he is judged in the medal race. It would be ludicrous for Phelps to blow off his training only to decide at the last minute to show up poolside at the Olympics to try to win a gold medal. He knows that a tremendous amount of practice is a nonnegotiable prerequisite to performing well.

The Michael Phelps anecdote reminds me of what is happening to our students. We put them in the "race" (in this case, high-stakes reading tests) and ask them to perform well. However, there is a big problem: these students have not been in the "pool" very much. They are being asked to perform at high levels even though many of them haven't been doing much authentic reading. Many haven't even put their toes in the water. If we want kids to become better readers, they have to read a lot more than they are currently reading. And if we want our students to do a lot more reading than they are currently doing, they need to be immersed in a pool of high-interest reading material.

Unfortunately, putting good books in front of our students has not been the focus in many of our nation's schools. I teach at a high school in Anaheim, and there is not a single bookstore in the community where I teach. (Anaheim must be the largest city in the country without either a Barnes and Noble or a Borders bookstore.) To make matters worse, my students come from print-poor environments. Under these circumstances, shouldn't schools be the place where students interact with interesting books? Shouldn't the faculty have an ongoing, laser-like commitment to put good books in our students' hands? Shouldn't this be a front-burner issue at all times?

Sadly, this is not happening. When was the last time your faculty had a substantive discussion about whether students have sufficient access to interesting reading materials? You would think that would be the first item of concern at the beginning of a new school year, but that is not the case. When I ask teachers how often they discuss acquiring interesting reading material in faculty meetings, the answer can be summed up with one word: infrequently. At my school, for example, the topics we discussed at the first faculty meeting two days before the start of school were as follows:

- ✖ A review of employee health benefits
- ✖ A review of how to call in for a substitute teacher
- ✖ A review of student referral forms
- ✖ A review of the attendance policy
- ✖ A review of the school's discipline plan
- ✖ A review of the district's grading policies
- ✖ A review of student progress report forms

✓ can we get
copies of
readicide
for all
teachers?

- ✖ A review of the school's voicemail system
- ✖ A review of the district's email policy
- ✖ A review of the school's moment-of-silence policy
- ✖ A review of how to fill out employee health cards
- ✖ A review of the district's new paycheck system
- ✖ A review of the district's drug and alcohol policy
- ✖ A review of the district's sexual harassment policy
- ✖ A review of our Academic Performance Index (API) and Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) scores from last year (but no time spent exploring what we might do about the scores)
- ✖ A reminder to have our faculty photos taken
- ✖ A reminder to take certain security measures
- ✖ A reminder for teachers to check their mailboxes at least twice a day
- ✖ An explanation of an on-site car wash service for teachers
- ✖ An explanation of the new teacher evaluation forms
- ✖ A discussion regarding Back-to-School Night
- ✖ A discussion regarding budget concerns
- ✖ A discussion of items that need to be placed on teachers' calendars
- ✖ Directions on how to submit a morning announcement to be read on the school's public address system
- ✖ An overview of a new automated home contact system
- ✖ A staff survey
- ✖ Three assistant principals shared their concerns
- ✖ The counseling department shared their concerns

more book
fairs

Three hours and twenty-eight agenda items later, reading had not been mentioned. No discussion about what might be leading to low reading test scores. Not one hint on what we might do to move students into deeper reading. No concern about the profound lack of interesting reading materials in students' homes, in our community, and on our campus. Two days before school began, and it was as though no reading problems existed on our campus. On the bright side, I left the meeting knowing when and where I could get my car washed every Friday.

It always amazes (and depresses) me that grown, educated adults can sit in a room and argue endlessly over whether a student's pants are too baggy or whether a student should be marked tardy if he or she is not yet seated when the bell rings. I am not making this up. One year the teachers in my school spent an entire year arguing about what color to paint our school. And every time we had one of those discussions, I thought about the classrooms a few feet away missing the one thing our students desperately need: interesting books.

Let me be clear: if we are to have any chance of developing a reading habit in our students, they must be immersed in a K-12 "book flood"—a term coined by researcher Warwick Elley (1991). Students must have ready access to a wide range of interesting reading materials. This goal should be the priority of every faculty. I discussed this in greater length in my first two books, *Reading Reasons* (2003) and *Deeper Reading* (2004), but the idea is worth restating when one considers what happens when students cannot get their hands on great books. We must start all discussions about the state of reading on our campuses with a simple, direct question: do our students have ample access to high-interest reading materials?

The Danger of Word Poverty

The importance of access to language emerges early in our students' lives. In *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Maryanne Wolf (2007) notes that "by kindergarten, a gap of 32 million words already separates some children in linguistically impoverished homes from their more stimulated peers. In other words, in some environments the average young middle-class child hears 32 million more spoken words than the young underprivileged child by age five" (20). A gap that forms before students even start school snowballs once school begins. As Wolf notes,

It is not simply a matter of the number of words unheard and unlearned. When words are not heard, concepts are not learned. When syntactic forms are never encountered, there is less knowledge about the relationship of events in a story. When story forms are never known, there is less ability to infer and predict. When cultural traditions and the feelings of others are never experienced, there is less understanding of what other people feel.
(2007, 102)

By the third grade, students who suffer from "word poverty" are often at a million-word reading deficit; by the sixth grade, they are already three grade levels behind their average-performing peers.

People who are undernourished need good food. Readers who are undernourished need good books. Lots of them. Instead, what do many undernourished readers get? They are often placed in remedial classes where the pace is slowed and where the reading focus moves away from books to a steady diet of small chunks of reading. In an effort to "help" prepare them for reading tests, we

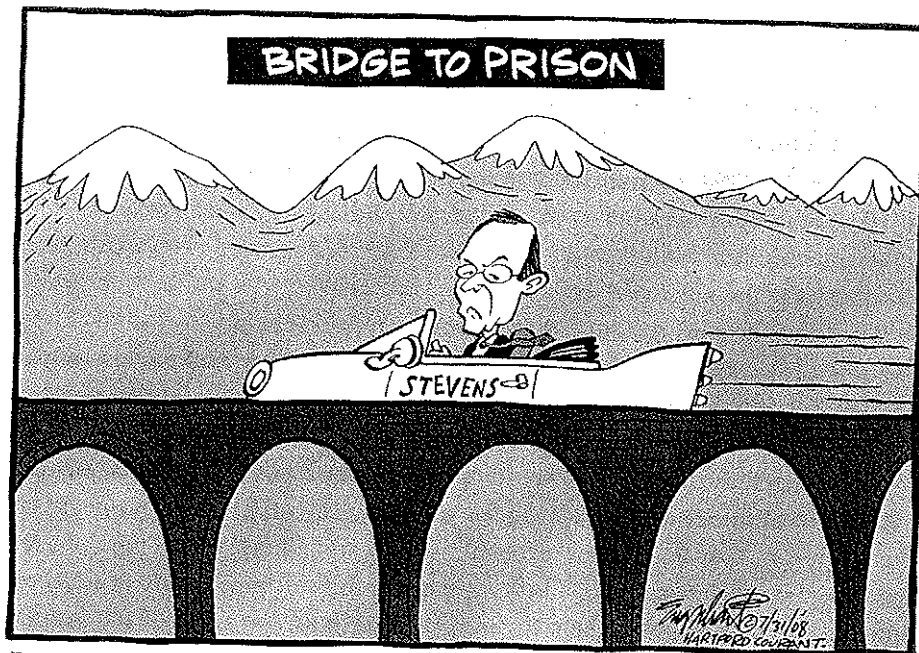


FIGURE 2.1
BRIDGE TO PRISON

starve readers. Rather than lift up struggling readers, this approach contributes to widening the achievement gap.

Let's take a moment to explore how narrowing the curriculum to spend more time on reading practice actually harms the building of young readers. For example, a reader needs to understand approximately 90 percent of the words found in a passage to comprehend the reading. Less commonly known is that the reader's knowledge of the world factors into making sense of print. What the reader brings to the page is often more important than the ability to read the words on the page. To illustrate this, read Figure 2.1.

I have shown this cartoon to adults in numerous workshops, and every adult can read the cartoon. Every person can read "Bridge to Prison." Every person has been able to read the word "Stevens" on the side of the car. In reading the cartoon, no one is tripped up by phonemic awareness or fluency problems. In short, reading the cartoon is not a problem. Comprehending the cartoon, however, is another matter. Though I have found almost everyone capable of reading the cartoon, few adult readers understand it, because to comprehend this cartoon you first have to know a number of things. To understand the Bridge to Prison cartoon, for example, you'd have to be aware of the events that were going on in the country when it was drawn:

- ✖ Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens, securing more than \$200 million in public funding, championed a proposed bridge to be built between Gravina Island and the town of Ketchikan.
- ✖ In September 2007, it was cancelled.
- ✖ In July 2008, Stevens, the longest-serving Republican senator and a figure in Alaska politics since before statehood, was indicted on seven counts of failing to disclose thousands of dollars in services he received from a company that helped renovate his home.
- ✖ The proposed bridge would have cost taxpayers \$329 million.
- ✖ The project, dubbed the “Bridge to Nowhere,” quickly became a national symbol of federal pork barrel spending.

Knowing these points before reading the cartoon enables the reader to comprehend it. Students who have not read voluminously may never have heard of the Bridge to Nowhere. They probably would not know what “pork barrel spending” means. More than likely, they never would have heard of Senator Stevens. Yes, they might be able to “read” the cartoon, but without the proper knowledge foundation, they will not understand it.

The Bridge to Prison cartoon reminds us that reading consists of two factors: (1) being able to decode words on the page and (2) being able to connect the words you are reading with the prior knowledge you bring to the page. When schools narrow reading to “help” students prepare for tests, or cut social studies, science, or electives to raise reading scores, they are removing invaluable opportunities for students to widen and deepen knowledge that is foundational to developing readers. Without a broad knowledge base, our students stand no chance of being excellent readers.

Unfortunately, as E. D. Hirsch (2006) points out in *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*, schools are reluctant to commit to the goal of building prior knowledge:

Most current reading programs talk about activating the reader's background knowledge so she can comprehend a text. But in practice, they are only paying lip service to the well-known scientific finding that background knowledge is essential to reading comprehension. Little attempt is made to enlarge the child's background knowledge. (Hirsch 2006, 72)

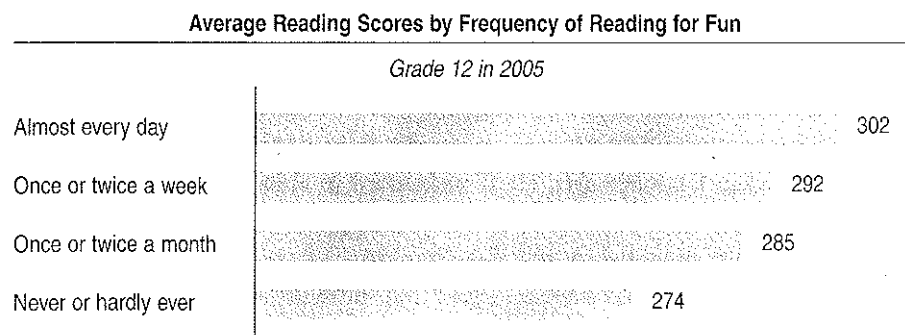
Hirsch is right, but he is too gentle. When schools remove books in favor of practice tests, when schools eliminate subjects such as science and history, when

schools drown students in test preparation, they are ensuring students will not become excellent readers. Instead of enlarging the background knowledge, quite the opposite occurs. This approach shrinks our students' understanding of the world. Students may pass the tests, but they're being robbed of perhaps the only opportunity they may ever have of building that wide knowledge base that is foundational if they are to develop into critical readers of the world. In the fevered quest to raise test scores, schools are irreparably harming young readers, especially readers who have already begun school suffering from word poverty.

The opposite approach, of course, is that by providing a wide and deep reading experience, we actually help students raise their test scores (without inflicting readicide). In a famous study of fifth graders, Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1998) found a strong correlation between time spent reading and performance on standardized reading tests.

| Percentage Rank | Minutes of Reading per Day | Estimated Number of Words Read per Year |
|-----------------|----------------------------|---|
| 98 | 90.7 | 4,733,000 |
| 90 | 40.4 | 2,357,000 |
| 70 | 21.7 | 1,168,000 |
| 50 | 12.9 | 601,000 |
| 20 | 3.1 | 134,000 |
| 10 | 1.6 | 51,000 |

More recently, in *To Read or Not to Read*, a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), researchers reached the same conclusion. Students who read the most for fun scored the highest on standardized reading tests:



Reading scores range from 0 to 500

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2005).

Students who read the most for fun also had the highest writing scores:

| Average Writing Scores by Frequency of Reading for Fun | |
|--|-----|
| Grade 12 in 2005 | |
| Almost every day | 165 |
| Once or twice a week | 154 |
| Once or twice a month | 149 |
| Never or hardly ever | 136 |

Writing scores range from 0 to 300

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2005).

Not surprisingly, these studies demonstrate that students who have the broadest reading experiences score the highest on standardized tests. Conversely, those students with the narrowest reading experiences scored the lowest. Clearly, if we want students to perform well on standardized reading tests, our top priority should not be in narrowing students into a test-prep curriculum; our focus should be on providing our students with the widest reading experiences possible.

The Importance of Knowledge Capital

Reading tests don't just measure a student's understanding of the words on the page; they also largely measure what a student brings to the page. This was illustrated recently when my students sat down to take the state's high school exit exam, a prerequisite for graduation. As they filed in to take the test, there was a sense of nervousness in the air. I was also a bit on edge, especially when I saw Matt walk in the door.

Matt is one of those kids who rarely attends school. He lives with his mom, who is a drug addict, and he has never met his father. Matt is not a reader, and he is unskilled in language arts. He is unfocused in class and often carries an undercurrent of anger with him. As I said, he rarely attends school, so I was surprised to see him show up on test day. Frankly, I was also concerned that he would drag down my class average. (Isn't that, in itself, a sad commentary on how testing twists teachers' brains? Here is a kid who needs school more than anyone else in the class, and I was actually sorry to see him show up to class on that particular day.) Because Matt had not been in class much, I was particularly worried about his reading endurance, so as he began taking the exam I kept him

in my line of vision. He started strong, but it wasn't long before Matt began what I call "The Reader's Melt." By the second passage and set of questions, he had begun sliding down in his chair. When he turned the pages to the third passage in his booklet, he gave up, let out a derisive snort, and skipped the passage entirely (not a strategy, by the way, that I had been emphasizing in class).

After the answer sheets were turned in I pulled Matt aside and told him I had noticed that he had skipped an entire section of the test. The conversation went something like this:

Mr. Gallagher: Matt, I noticed you skipped a section of the test. Right?

Matt: Yep.

Mr. G: Why did you do that?

Matt: Did you see what that section of the test was called?

Mr. G: No. What was it called?

Matt: The Farrier . . . I didn't know what that was, so I skipped it.

After Matt left, I retrieved a test booklet and found the passage in question. To be honest, looking at the title, I did not know what a farrier was either, so I read the passage. It didn't take too long to figure it out; the first sentence read: "A farrier, a person who makes a living by putting shoes on horses, can make a good living." The farrier sentence piqued my interest, so later that day I began my three senior classes by asking how many students knew the definition of a farrier. Out of ninety-nine urban, Southern Californian twelfth graders, not a single student knew the word. Not one. Not knowing the word myself, I was not surprised.

However, here is where the story gets interesting: two days later, I was demonstrating a lesson in a high school classroom in Wyoming. Before beginning the lesson, I asked the students how many of them could tell me what a farrier was. Hands shot up. Almost every student in the classroom knew the word. Now I only spent a short time with these students, and I could be wrong, but I sensed they were very much like my own students—not superstar readers, not illiterate, more aliterate than anything else. They know how to read, but outside of school, they rarely choose to do so.

When I arrived back at school the next day, I told my classes how the students in Wyoming knew the word *farrier*. "I found that interesting," I told them. "Seeing how none of you knew the word, I have come to a simple conclusion: students in Wyoming are smarter than you." This, of course, started an interesting argument that led to the key point I wanted my students to consider. It isn't that the students in Wyoming are necessarily smarter than my students in California; it's just that their experiences growing up in Wyoming have varied

greatly from the experiences of kids who grow up in a major city. They grew up with horses; my students didn't.

I am not defending Matt's choice to skip "The Farrier" passage. But I think the story points out the importance that prior knowledge plays when a reader approaches a page. If I teach "The Farrier" in Wyoming, I can hand it to the students and get started immediately, but if I teach this story in Anaheim, as the teacher, I need to frame the text before their reading commences. These kids in Wyoming and in Anaheim might have the same reading abilities, but that doesn't mean they are on equal footing when the reading starts. Kids without prior knowledge are at a disadvantage, regardless of reading ability.

The importance of what a reader brings to the page is also highlighted in a study discussed by Hirsch in *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006). This study consisted of two groups of students who were asked to read a passage about baseball. The first group was made up of strong readers who knew little about baseball. The second group was composed of struggling readers who were knowledgeable about baseball. After reading the passage, students in each group had their comprehension tested. Guess which group scored higher? The struggling readers. Having strong reading skills was not enough for the students who came to the page with a knowledge deficit about the topic. Though the second group of readers were not strong readers, the prior knowledge they brought to the page enabled them to outscore readers with far better abilities. Prior knowledge, or, in the case of the good readers, the lack of prior knowledge, was the x-factor (Hirsch 2006).

I do not know whether this year's state test will have a passage about baseball or farriers, but I do know one thing: those students who sit down to the exam with the broadest base of prior knowledge will have the highest chances of scoring well. If we are serious about building strong readers, we need to be serious about building strong knowledge foundations in our students. With this in mind, we should be mindful of the large wealth of knowledge capital that comes from the voluminous reading of books, newspapers, blogs, and magazines. These are the sources that build the critical foundations of serious readers, and knowing the value of these sources returns us to some crucial questions for educators at your school to consider Do students at your school have access to a wide range of interesting reading materials? Is providing access to interesting text a priority among your administration and faculty? Are students on your campus immersed in a book flood? Are we giving them every opportunity, via reading, to build vital knowledge capital? Are these questions even addressed during your faculty meetings?

Readicide Factor: Many Schools Have Removed Novels and Other Longer Challenging Works to Provide Teachers and Students with More Test Preparation Time

I have begun to notice a troubling trend with many of my adolescent readers over the past few years. Most of these students can “read,” but when it comes time to think deeply about what they have read, they have difficulty diving below the surface. They can regurgitate text on a literal level, but increasingly, they have trouble with heavier intellectual lifting (e.g., evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing). They can find information on a moment’s notice on the Internet, but they have trouble getting past a surface-level understanding of the text they retrieve. In short, they know a lot, but they understand little. This phenomenon is not limited to my classroom in Anaheim; I hear this same concern from teachers across the country.

Jane Healy, author of *Endangered Minds: Why Children Can’t Think—and What We Can Do About It* (1990), notes that as children grow, they have very distinct developmental needs. She states, “Neuroscience suggests strongly that if the child’s developmental needs during these periods are not met, we may actually close down some of those developmental windows” (Healy 1990, 2–3). Like many parents and teachers, Healy is concerned about the effects of television and video games on our children’s brains, especially when they are in these key cognitive developmental windows. It is no coincidence, Healy suggests, that alongside the advent of television and computer games, there has been a drastic increase in the number of children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder. And though “certain brains have constitutional difficulty in paying attention, our culture is not helping those brains develop strategies for attention and it may be pushing some kids off the deep end who wouldn’t be there otherwise” (Healy 1990, 2). Outside of school, many of our students are not partaking in those critical activities that stretch and deepen their brains. Instead, they often gravitate to those behaviors that offer instant gratification. As a result, Healy notes, many children are literally starving the lobes of the prefrontal cortex of their brains, a starvation Healy characterizes as “frightening.”

If our students’ neurological windows are shutting down, then school may be the only place where they are given an opportunity to build up the key parts of their brains that need to be developed before acquiring the ability to think deeply. Unfortunately, the trend in our schools is in the opposite direction. Healy

laments that in today's schools, students "are not allowed to sit and think. They are constantly rammed through a curriculum to see how fast we can move them along. As they are marched from activity to activity, even the schedule of the school day doesn't allow time for anyone to reflect. And coming up with solutions is quite different from the type of thinking required to be successful on some of the so-called achievement tests" (Healy 1990, 4). Schools, she adds, "are very out of sync with what's going to be needed in our thinking for the next century, and, in fact, is desperately needed right now" (4).

When schools remove novels from the students' curriculum and replace challenging books with shorter pieces and worksheets, they are denying students the foundational reading experiences for developing those regions of their brains that enable them to think deeply. As Wolf states, "To acquire [reading skills] children need instructional environments that support all the circuit parts that need bolting for the brain to read. Such a perspective departs from current teaching methods that focus largely on only one or two major components of reading" (2007, 19). When we deny students the opportunity to read long, complex works, we are starving a part of their brains, and we start producing kids like the students in my class who can read but who cannot get below the surface of what they read.

Administrators who remove novels from the curriculum do not understand the harm they are inflicting on adolescents. Novels are not part of the problem; the problem lies in how the novels are taught. Any teacher worth his salt can teach any language arts standard through teaching any novel. I can teach students to recognize themes whether they are reading *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby*. I can teach students to write an analytical essay whether they are reading *Hamlet* or *Animal Farm*. I can teach students to stand up and deliver an argument whether they are reading *1984* or *Of Mice and Men*.

Unfortunately, I have had administrators in my career who do not understand this. They think that when I teach novels my kids are "just reading stories." I actually had an administrator ask me one time to stop reading the novel so my kids could start practicing their "critical thinking skills." Administrators who remove novels from the curriculum do not understand that when we teach the standards through complex novels, the benefits to students are twofold: they not only learn the standards but also develop the deepest regions of their brains. They stretch their brains to read longer, more challenging works.

Starving the part of the brain that needs to be developed before deeper reading can occur also has consequences outside the classroom. Readicide has long-lasting ramifications beyond the school years. As Healy wonders, "Are we going

to have an entire generation of people who cannot manage their own behavior, manage their world, plan ahead, reflect on abstract ideas, or relate appropriately to moral and social and ethical issues?" (1990, 4). These concerns arise when the brain is not given every opportunity to develop. The window shuts. If we want to keep these windows from shutting, if we want our students to be complex thinkers, they need to be challenged to read long, complex texts. Instead of removing novels from the curriculum, we should be giving them *more* novels to read. Far from being part of the problem, novels should be seen as part of the solution.

Many people might construe my argument about the importance of novels as a call for removing large anthology series from the curriculum. In the interest of full disclosure, I am a consultant for a national anthology program. I use anthologies in my classroom and find them to be valuable. I object to districts that remove novels so that the only reading done by students is short pieces out of an anthology. I don't use the anthology in my classroom as the entire curriculum. I use the rich short stories and poems in the anthology to augment the novels my students are reading. My students read both long and short pieces, because I want them to exercise all regions of their reading brains.

Readicide Factor: Students Are Not Doing Enough Reading in School

According to *To Read or Not to Read* (National Endowment for the Arts 2007), Americans are reading less. Consider the following:

- ✖ Less than one-third of thirteen-year-olds are daily readers, a 14 percent decline from twenty years earlier.
- ✖ Among seventeen-year-olds, the percentage of nonreaders has more than doubled over a twenty-year period, from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004.
- ✖ The percentage of thirteen-year-olds who read for fun on a daily basis declined from 35 percent to 30 percent, and for seventeen-year-olds the decline was from 33 percent to 22 percent.
- ✖ On average, Americans ages fifteen to twenty-four spend almost two hours a day watching television, and only seven minutes of their leisure time on reading.
- ✖ Nearly half of all Americans ages fifteen to twenty-four do not read books for pleasure.

For anyone in the classroom, these findings are not a surprise. The more important question, of course, is what we can do in our classrooms to turn the tide.

One of the casualties of this testing era seems to be the death of sustained silent reading (SSR). As I travel across the country, I see that SSR has been removed from schools to give students more time to prepare for exams. SSR has clearly fallen out of favor, which is unfortunate because eliminating SSR is wrongheaded for three reasons:

SSR is actually a valuable investment in test preparation. In *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*, Stephen Krashen (1993b) notes:



✖ In 38 of 41 studies, students given free voluntary reading (FVR) time did as well as or better in reading comprehension tests than students given traditional skill-based reading instruction (2).

✖ The longer FVR is practiced, the more consistent the results (3).



✖ Reading as a leisure activity is the best predictor of comprehension, vocabulary, and reading speed (5). Kids who do the most recreational reading become the best readers.

✖ Reading is too complex to learn one rule at a time (14).

Interestingly, after Krashen's book was published, the National Reading Panel stated that no definitive study proved that FVR has a positive effect on reading comprehension. This finding interested Yi-Chen Wu and S. Jay Samuels (2004), researchers at the University of Minnesota, who conducted a study of their own. Their findings flew in the face of the National Reading Panel:



✖ "More time spent reading had a significant effect on achievement compared to a control condition where less time was allotted for recreational reading" (2).

✖ "Poor readers showed significantly greater gain in word recognition and vocabulary than good readers" (2).



✖ "Poor readers tended to have greater gains in vocabulary with 15 minutes of reading" and "they had better gains on reading comprehension with 40 minutes of reading" (2).

Wu and Samuels (2004) also cite a number of studies that found a high correlation between the amount of independent reading time and students' reading achievement scores. Krashen is also critical of the National Reading Panel's findings:

The NRP report missed a number of important studies. In The Power of Reading, I found nine studies which lasted longer than one year; sustained silent reading was a winner in eight of them, and in one there was no difference. The NRP did not cite any of these studies, even though some appeared in very important, widely read journals. Some spectacular omissions include Elley and Mangubhai's Fiji study, published in the Reading Research Quarterly (1983), and Elley's Singapore study, in Language Learning (1991). The latter contains a review of several other successful SSR studies that the NRP failed to mention. (2000)

SSR is necessary to allow students an opportunity to build their prior knowledge and background. Students who do not develop the habit of reading books, newspapers, and magazines end up as seniors in high school wondering why they have never heard of a guy named Al Qaeda. They become the ninth graders in my class who cannot tell me the name of the vice president of the United States. They become the native-speaking student in my high school class who highlighted the following words in a handout as words he did not understand: *lethal, ballot, backlash, via, barricade, ambitious, formidable, and abstain*. It's scary when a teenager doesn't understand the word *abstain*, wouldn't you say?

When it comes to vocabulary acquisition, SSR provides the best investment of reading time. As Krashen (1993b) notes:

- ✕ Each time an unfamiliar word is seen in print, a small increase in word knowledge typically occurs (8).
- ✕ Students who read a novel with many unique words actually learned the meaning of those words from context clues only (10).
- ✕ FVR results in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development (12).

The stakes are high. If those students who enter schools linguistically impoverished—thirty-two million words behind—do not read extensively, they will never catch up. This bears repeating: struggling readers who do not read voraciously will never catch up.

Students with the broadest vocabularies, of course, stand the greatest chance of scoring well on exams that measure vocabulary and comprehension. Unfortunately, a 2007 global study found that fourth-grade students in the United States, despite the emphasis on reading under No Child Left Behind, have actually lost ground in reading ability compared with students from around the world (Zuckerbrod 2007). This loss occurred between 2001 and

2006, years that, not surprisingly, coincide with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Finland recently finished first in an international study of literacy. Finland has no standardized testing; yet, they produce the strongest readers in the world. Yes, I know the Finns are a more culturally homogeneous population than those students we find in our classrooms, but this should not minimize their ranking (after all, they finished ahead of all other homogeneous populations as well).

These findings remind me of the words of Lev Vygotsky, who said, "Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, 88).

SSR provides many students with their only opportunity to develop a recreational reading habit. When I was in college, I waited tables at a restaurant that specialized in spaghetti. Though their menu has broadened over the years, when I worked there, spaghetti (with various sauces) pretty much made up the menu. As a poor college student, I often took advantage of the employee free meal program. The good news was I received a free plate of spaghetti before clocking in to work each night. The bad news was I received a free plate of spaghetti before clocking in to work each night. Though the spaghetti was good, it did not take long before I started seeing spaghetti in my nightmares. By the time I left that job, I was so sick of spaghetti I did not eat it again for years.

I think of the awfulness of eating spaghetti every night when I witness students who have progressed through the school system who are fed a steady diet of academic reading only. By the time they walk into my ninth-grade class, they have become sick of reading. I would tire of reading too if I was only encouraged to read difficult classics. I am not arguing against teaching classic literature. There is a real value in challenging students with longer, difficult texts (more on this in Chapters 3 and 4). However, when academic reading is the only kind of reading put on our students' plates, readicide occurs. As much as I love Dickens and Shakespeare, I would turn off to reading if I didn't have a balanced reading diet that included Scott Turow or Michael Connelly.

SSR has failed in a number of schools. In most cases of failure, one or more of the following were contributing factors:

- ✖ Students were placed in SSR without interesting books to read. Telling a student that reading is a worthwhile activity is one thing, having numerous interesting books for the student to choose from is another.
- ✖ Students were required (or allowed) to do academic reading or homework during SSR.

- ✖ Teachers did not understand the value of SSR. Often they were not reading with their students or were using this time to grade essays, catch up on paperwork, or answer emails.

To become a lifelong reader, one has to do a lot of varied and interesting reading. If students don't read much at home, school becomes the only place where "lighter" reading can take hold. When schools deprive students of the pleasures of recreational reading, we end up graduating test-takers who may never again read for pleasure.

Author Joel Epstein once said, "We are what we read" (1985, 395). True, but consider the flip side, "We are what we don't read." And when a student doesn't read, he turns into the eighteen-year-old in my third period who didn't vote because he didn't know what the word *proposition* on the ballot meant.

What You Can Do to Prevent Readicide

This chapter has made the point that readicide is occurring because our students are denied the varied authentic reading experiences foundational to building adolescent readers. Specifically, I discussed three negative trends in our schools:

1. There is a dearth of interesting reading materials in our schools.
2. Many schools have removed novels and other longer challenging works to provide teachers and students with more test preparation time.
3. Students are not doing enough reading in school.

Let's now examine each of these individually in an effort to explore what you can do to turn the tide of readicide.

There Is a Dearth of Interesting Reading Materials in Our Schools

What you can do:

Take a stand. It is amazing how many teachers across this country have told me they do not have enough copies of a novel for students to take home and read. I am often told there are enough books for a class set but not enough books for each student to take an individual copy home. Therefore, all reading of the novel is done in class. What is also amazing to me is how many teachers have come to accept this situation.

I know that as teachers, we are faced with numerous battles. I also know that there is much wisdom in the advice that we must choose our battles. If we fight every battle, we will suffer a collapse worse than the 2007 New York Mets. Let me be unequivocal: making sure every student has a book to take home to read is the single most important issue in our quest to develop young readers.

If students don't have books, they will never develop into readers. If students only read in school, they will never become lifelong readers. In fact, I contend that teachers whose students read only in school ensure that their students will forever remain behind grade level as readers. Harsh words? Yes. But a system that does not provide books for students to take home to read is an immoral system, and teachers who quietly resign themselves to these systems contribute to the problem.

I can already hear some of you shouting at me, particularly those of you who teach in financially strapped schools: "My school doesn't have money for books!" or "I have asked, but my principal says we have to make do with what we have!" I would counter these real concerns with what I know: your school district does have money. That's not the problem. The problem is where districts allocate their resources. If your students don't have books, your school district is spending its money in the wrong places. (Here is something else I know: many districts often squander large sums of money. My own district recently required fifty teachers to attend a test-taking strategy seminar. Total cost: \$20,000. Total benefit: almost zero.) If your students do not have books, your school district's priorities are misplaced.

Again, I can hear your concerns: "But I am a teacher, not an administrator!" True, but when the decisions upstairs play a role in permanently damaging the literacy development of our children, it is time for us to take a stand. If you need books, go to your department chair. If your department chair says there is no funding for books, go to your principal. If your principal says there is no money for books, go to the director of instructional services. If the director of instructional services says there is no money for books, go to the assistant superintendent. If the assistant superintendent says there is no money for books, go to the superintendent. If the superintendent says there is no money for books, go to the school board. If the school board says there is no money for books, go to the media, go to local businesses, go to the community. Make a stink. Make it happen. Of all the battles we face, this is the one worth falling on your sword for. If none of the above steps work, go teach somewhere else. No one should consciously be part of a system that ensures that kids fail. That's unconscionable.

Augment books with authentic, real-world text. In *Proust and the Squid*, Maryanne Wolf (2007) discusses the importance of producing "bi-textual"

readers—students who garner reading from a number of different sources. To help facilitate this, teachers need to augment the curriculum by surrounding the core curriculum with as much real-world text as possible.

When I realized that in two different class periods I did not have a single ninth-grade student who could identify the vice president of the United States, I grasped how serious the lack of my students' reading depth had become. Yes, they can recognize foreshadowing in *Lord of the Flies*, but they have little understanding of what is going on in the world outside of their high school. Sadly, they are light years away from being multitextual readers.

One way I addressed this problem in my classroom was by adding a weekly reading task I call "The Article-of-the-Week." These are real-world writings taken from straight news stories, essays, editorials, blogs, and speeches. I cull them from newspapers, magazines, and websites. Sometimes the articles are related to the unit we are currently studying and sometimes they are completely unrelated, but all the articles have one purpose—to broaden my students' knowledge of the world. This past school year, for example, my students read and studied more than thirty different articles (see Figure 2.2).

| | |
|--|--|
| 9/11 suspects may face death penalty | Children of baby boomers are flooding |
| Our schools are facing drastic budget cuts | colleges with applications |
| 1 in 100 Americans are now in prison | Rethinking nuclear power |
| The environmental hazards posed by bottled | The Texas polygamy story |
| water | Cyclone kills hundreds in Myanmar |
| A proposal to tax junk food | Hope fades in search for China earthquake |
| Inside a Chicago street gang | victims |
| The ten greatest inventions of all time | The influence the next president will have in |
| Gambler sues casino to recoup her losses | selecting Supreme Court members |
| An editorial on California's decision to | An account of a firefight in Iraq |
| legalize gay marriage | Violations of "Islamic teachings" take toll on |
| The soldier whose job it is to inform families | Iraqi women |
| they have lost a loved one | The Iraq money pit |
| Global warming | An overview of global poverty |
| The One Laptop per Child Project | Cocaine-addiction vaccine is in the works |
| New health care clinics are opening inside | How Starbucks is changing music distribution |
| traditional businesses | Fear-based ads sneak into subconscious, |
| How the American Disabilities Act affects | researcher says |
| health care | The NSA—America's most secret agency |
| The pervasiveness of photography that has | Are Americans overmedicated? |
| been airbrushed | A number of articles on both the Republican |
| | and Democratic primaries |

FIGURE 2.2
ARTICLE-OF-THE-WEEK TOPICS FOR THE 2007–2008 SCHOOL YEAR

Directions:

1. Demonstrate evidence of close reading.
2. Highlight your confusion.
3. Answer the two questions at the bottom of the page.
4. Write a 1+ page reflection in your WN.

Do Cell Phones Cause Cancer?

Are cell phones dangerous?

The scientific consensus has long been that they are not—though recently, some troubling research has led to new doubts. As soon as mobile phones began hitting the market in the 1980s, concerns were raised that the electromagnetic radio waves they emit might cause brain tumors and other types of cancer. But as cell phones became ubiquitous, at least a dozen major studies found no such link. The Food and Drug Administration said recently that three large epidemiological studies since 2000 showed "no harmful effects" from cell phone use, and the World Health Organization holds a similar view. The theory that cell phones pose health risks, says Dr. Eugene Flamm, chairman of neurosurgery at New York's Montefiore Medical Center, "defies credulity."

What's the basis of that contention?

Cell phones emit non-ionizing radiation, waves of energy that are too weak to break the chemical bonds within cells or to cause the DNA damage known to cause cancer. There is simply no known biological mechanism to explain how non-ionizing radiation might lead to cancer. But some researchers say that the lack of a known mechanism does not rule out the possibility that one exists and has yet to be understood. They also say that older studies on cell phone safety contained a major flaw.

What's the flaw?

As the FDA itself acknowledges, most of the studies examined cell phone use over a period of about three years—not long enough to rule out the possibility of long-term effects. "It takes at least 10, 20, or 30 years to see exposure to cancer," says Israeli neuroscientist Dr. Siegal Sadetzki. She points out that it took decades before scientists could prove that people exposed to radiation at Hiroshima had a much higher incidence of brain tumors. Critics also say that the studies have largely ignored the impact of cell phones on teenagers and preteens whose developing brains may be more vulnerable, especially since many of them tend to use cell phones for hours every day (see box).

What does recent research show?

Two major studies have found an association, though not a causal relationship, between cell phone use and certain cancers. Last year, the American Journal of Epidemiology published data from Israel finding a 50 percent higher risk of cancer of the parotid, a salivary gland near the ear, among habitual cell phone users. A Swedish analysis of 16 studies in the journal Occupational and Environmental Medicine showed a doubling of risk for acoustic neuroma, a tumor that occurs where the ear meets the brain, after 10 years of heavy cell phone use. "There are some very disconcerting findings that suggest a problem," says Dr. Louis Slesin, editor of Microwave News, an industry publication that tracks the research, "although it's much too early to reach a conclusive view."

What does the industry say?

Citing the authority of the World Health Organization, cell phone companies say the technology poses no known risks and requires no precautions. They also stress that

FIGURE 2.3

ARTICLE-OF-THE-WEEK EXAMPLE (ANNOTATED)

The Article-of-the-Week (AoW) is distributed every Monday and collected every Friday. (See Figure 2.3 for an example.) Since starting this weekly assignment, the entire English Department at my school has gotten behind the idea. That means every student at Magnolia High School receives an AoW. Teachers take turns selecting the articles, and a different article is distributed at each grade

What is the safe radiation levels that the government approves of? radiation levels from cell phones fall well within government safety guidelines. "The overwhelming majority of studies that have been published in scientific journals around the globe show that wireless phones do not pose a health risk," says a spokesman for the Wireless Association, the leading industry trade group. But cell phone makers and service providers are nervously awaiting the results of an ambitious international research effort, called Interphone, on the health impact of cell phone use being conducted by WHO's World Health Organization International Agency for Research on Cancer. The study, culled and analyzing data spanning more than a decade from 13 countries, is expected to be published later this year.

So it's safe to say that many people are going to be concerned about the new info. about the cell phone risks. Will some countries exclude long-time cell phone use? Any early word on what it will conclude? Many experts say it will raise new red flags. They're basing that expectation on the fact that some of the countries involved in the study, including Israel and Sweden, have already gone public with their own results. A recent analysis by Swedish oncologist Dr. Lennart Hardell looked at 10 European studies published between 2001 and 2007, most of which will also be part of the Interphone study. Hardell found "a consistent pattern of association" between certain brain tumors and long-term cell phone use. A 2007 research paper in Finland looked at brain cancer studies in five Northern European countries and found a "significantly increased" risk after cell phone use of more than 10 years.

So what should consumers do? Nobody is saying we should all throw away our cell phones. But many health experts have stepped forward in recent months to say they now have enough concern that they are advising users to take some precautions—such as using speaker mode or earpieces, rather than holding the phone directly to your head. Just last week, the director of the prestigious University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, Dr. Ronald Herberman, warned his faculty and staff to limit cell phone use because of the possible cancer risk. Herberman cited a "growing body of literature"—including unpublished studies—that link long-term cell phone use to adverse health effects, though he acknowledged the findings are far from conclusive. "We shouldn't wait for a definitive study to come out," Herberman said, "but err on the side of being safe rather than sorry later."

Worrying about the kids Advocates who worry about cell phones' impact on human health say they're most concerned about children, who face a lifetime of exposure. "They may be much more affected," says Dr. Paul Rosch of New York Medical College. "Their brains are growing rapidly, and their skulls are thinner." Some researchers are now advising that pending further study, children should use land lines to speak to friends, and use cell phones only in emergencies. Dr. Siegal Sadetzki, the Israeli researcher, says it's reasonable to assume that whatever harmful effects cell phones produce "will accumulate," so children are particularly at risk. That doesn't mean banning cell phones, she says, but finding ways to reduce radiation exposure among users. "Nobody will stop using this technology. There are car accidents and still we keep driving cars," she says. "The question is, what precautions do we take?"

What is the author's purpose? to inform

Who is the intended audience? Cell phone users, and the general audience (adults...)

Source: *The Week* 8/8/08

even when you aren't holding the phone to your head, it still emits non-ionizing energy?

I know a hand full of people who are not going to be happy to hear this but if it's for their own good then they better listen.

FIGURE 2.3
ARTICLE-OF-THE-WEEK EXAMPLE (ANNOTATED) (continued)

level. (You may access the articles on my website, www.kellygallagher.org.) Students who stay at our school throughout their high school years will graduate having read approximately 140 articles. (Remember, these articles are in addition to the standard curriculum.) Reading 140 real-world articles builds our students' knowledge capital so that when they graduate they will have a better chance of comprehending our world. They will know who al Qaeda is. They will recognize the vice president of the United States. They will be dialed into the real world.

I will discuss how students interact with the AoWs and how I assess them in Chapter 4.



If you want to find out how little your students know about the world, hand them a copy of *Newsweek*. Paging through the articles with students is a sobering experience. When I realized that their lack of knowledge was seriously hindering their understanding of real-world issues, I augmented my curriculum with one class set of *Newsweek* delivered to my classroom each week. I didn't have the money to fund this program, so I went up the hierarchy of decision-makers until someone "found" the money to pay for a class set subscription. One night a week, students take the magazine home to read. First period gets Monday night, second period gets Tuesday night, and so on. Sometimes I choose an article as the focus of their reading; other times students are free to pick an article to read. Much like the AoW, this reading is done in addition to the standard curriculum.

Here are some assignments I have given my students for overnight *Newsweek* reading:

- ✕ Choose your three favorite quotes or passages from this week's issue and write a reflection for each in your writer's notebook.
- ✕ Write down five things you learned by reading this week's issue. Which of these five do you think is the most important to know? Explain.
- ✕ Which article in the magazine do you think is least newsworthy? Why do you think the magazine ran the article? Defend your answers.
- ✕ After reading an interesting article, create a t-chart. On the left side, bullet the key points of the article. On the right side, list what the article doesn't say. What has been left out?
- ✕ Which photograph in this week's issue is most effective? Explain why you chose this photograph.
- ✕ After reading this article, reflect on the author's purpose and who the intended audience might be.
- ✕ Choose an article that may contain bias. Identify the bias and explain the "other side."
- ✕ Pick three articles and rewrite their headlines. Explain why your headlines are better.
- ✕ Free response. Respond to an article of your choice any way you see fit.

Newsweek has proved to be an invaluable student source for real-world text. I am determined that my students will not only pass the state tests, but that they will leave my classroom with a much greater understanding of the world.

Be the “discussion director” on your campus. Many of you know Harvey Daniels’s *Literature Circles* (2002), in which students are assigned roles to help facilitate collaborative thought. One of these roles is the “discussion director,” whose job is to make sure the group stays on task and doesn’t stray from its focus. With this role in mind, I suggest that you become a discussion director among your faculty, working to keep the faculty’s focus on surrounding students with real-world text across the curriculum.

Many teachers have become so buried by the pressures of teaching to the test and by the overburdening number of standards that they have lost sight of the value of students reading newspapers, magazines, Internet articles, blogs, and other valuable sources of information. Instead, teachers are wed to their textbooks in a solemn march to get to the exams. However, most teachers genuinely want to do what’s best for their students. These teachers are not intentionally harming kids; they have simply forgotten the importance of surrounding their students with interesting real-world reading.

Someone on your campus needs to be the discussion director—someone who raises this issue and keeps your faculty focused. Do your students have access to interesting books? Do they have time to read? It all starts with raising the awareness level of the faculty and administrators. To bolster your argument, it is helpful to share research. I have found the following research articles to be good places to start:

- ✖ http://edresearch.info/by_children.asp
- ✖ <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/394>
- ✖ http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2003/AE_SPRNG.pdf
- ✖ <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/promising/tips/tipfvr.html>
- ✖ <http://www.sdkrashen.com/articles/pac5/all.html>

Once awareness is raised, be the torchbearer on this issue. Do not allow the faculty’s attention to stray. Ask your administrators to keep this issue in focus. At my school, I ask for five minutes whenever we have a teacher-only day or a late-start day. I use this time to remind my colleagues of the importance of SSR and why bringing authentic text into the classroom is a priority.

Establish a book flood zone. Warrick Elley, the New Zealand researcher, studied the reading achievement of more than 200,000 students in thirty-two countries and found a strong correlation between time spent reading and reading achievement (1991). Not surprisingly, he also found that the amount of a student's out-of-school reading strongly relates to reading achievement levels. A study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) came to a similar conclusion. It found "that students who read for fun almost every day outside of school scored higher on the NAEP assessment of reading achievement than children who read for fun only once or twice a week, who in turn outscored children who read for fun outside of school only once or twice a month, who in turn, outscored children who hardly ever or never read for fun outside of school" (EdResearch.info).

Notice the key phrase in the NAEP study: "read for fun." Not reading to analyze the author's use of tone. Not reading to answer multiple-choice questions. Reading for fun. If students are to read for fun, they need fun books to read. Many of them. They need immersion in a book flood, and because many of our students come from print-poor environments at home, that book flood needs to be found at school.

I have found that placing students in a daily book flood zone produces much more reading than occasionally taking them to the library. Consider, for example, Lois Duncan, the author of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and other murder mysteries. Chillingly, in the middle of writing all these murder mysteries, Duncan's own teenage daughter, Kaitlyn, was murdered. The authorities never captured the killer or killers, which led Duncan to write *Who Killed My Daughter?* I was stunned when I read this book, so I couldn't wait to tell my students about it. The conversation went something like this:

Mr. Gallagher: I read a book last night I know many of you will enjoy.

Students: (Silence.)

Mr. Gallagher: How many of you have seen *I Know What You Did Last Summer*?

Students: (Many hands shoot up.)

Mr. Gallagher: This is creepy, but did you know that in real life—in the middle of writing a number of murder mysteries—that the author who wrote that book had a teenage daughter who was murdered? Worse, the police never found the murderer, so the author, Lois Duncan, wrote a work of nonfiction titled *Who Killed My Daughter?*

Students: (Silence . . . but showing some signs of being mildly interested.)

Mr. Gallagher: Because I like this book so much, I checked our school library this morning and found it has three copies. I give this book a strong recom-

mendation and suggest you get to the library after school ASAP to snag one of the copies.

I gave this speech to every one of my classes, 165 students. After school, I stopped in the library and was chagrined to see two of the three copies of the book still sitting on the shelf. Apparently, my speech had motivated exactly one of my students to walk from my room to the library to check out the book.

Unhappy with that result, I checked out the other two copies of *Who Killed My Daughter?* and brought them to class the next day. The conversation that day went something like this:

Mr. Gallagher: I noticed only one student checked out the book I recommended yesterday, *Who Killed My Daughter?* That's too bad because I really think many of you will like this book. In fact, let me give you a taste of the book by reading the first few paragraphs (I read):

Our teenage daughter Kaitlyn was chased down and shot to death while driving home from a girlfriend's house on a peaceful Sunday evening.

Police dubbed the shooting "random."

"You're going to have to accept the fact that the reason Kait died was because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time," they told us.

But to our family the circumstances did not add up to "random," especially after we made the shocking discovery that Kait had been keeping some very dangerous secrets from us" (7).

(Pause.) Now . . . who is interested in reading this book?

Students: (A number of hands are raised.)

Mr. Gallagher: Okay, because I saw their hands first, I will give my two copies to Alex and Kristi. I will put everyone else on a waiting list.

I then created a waiting list for the book—the same book my students wouldn't walk thirty-eight steps from my classroom to the school library to pick up, a book that will get passed to numerous students throughout the school year. What did I learn from this experience? Instead of always taking students to the library, it is often much more effective to bring the library to the students. Having the Lois Duncan book in the classroom made a big difference. There is something powerful about surrounding kids with interesting books (see Appendix A for a list of books my students love to read). I have 2,000 books in my room, and because of this, my students do a lot more reading. Establishing a book flood is probably the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career.

It also helps to remember that building a classroom library is a career-long pursuit. Unfortunately, so is finding the funding sources to buy books. Though I mention these in my first book, *Reading Reasons* (2003), it may be worthwhile to mention the funding sources that may be available on your campus:

- ✖ Principal's discretionary funds
- ✖ Title I money
- ✖ Title II money
- ✖ School improvement funds
- ✖ One-time money
- ✖ Grant money
- ✖ Curriculum cycle money

Other ways to bring books into your classroom:

✖ *Organize book drives.* At the end of the year, I conduct a book drive in my classes. I ask graduating seniors to donate a book to my classroom library as a way of leaving a literary footprint behind. I ask them to consider the best book they have read and to donate a copy of it, new or used. Every year, this generates a couple of hundred of books for my classroom library (many students donate more than one title).

Order books from Scholastic.com. I loved getting those monthly book order forms in school when I was a student. Once a month I distribute the order forms to my students, and every time they order a book I receive points toward free books. Scholastic also has large warehouses across the country, and many of them conduct a once-a-year massive sale. See their website for details.

Solicit donations at Back-to-School Night. Appendix A lists books that even my most reluctant readers enjoy reading (this is an updated list from the book lists found in *Reading Reasons*). Copy this list and send it home before Back-to-School Night with a brief letter asking parents to donate a title or two when they visit. This creates two benefits: your classroom library grows, and it presents an opportunity at Back-to-School Night to discuss with parents the importance of establishing a book flood.

Discover used books on Amazon.com. I budget \$50 a month to augment my classroom library, and much of it is used to purchase used books at Amazon.com, where you can buy excellent books for as little as a penny. That's the good news.

The bad news is shipping is usually \$3, but even with shipping factored in, it is still an inexpensive way to build a classroom library.

Recognize and fight against summer reading loss. It seems almost silly to establish a book flood zone for part of the year, only to let our students out for three months of summer vacation. Studies have shown that many students lose ground in the summer months, particularly those students from print-poor home environments. Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard Allington (2004) note the following:

- ✖ Summer reading loss is one factor contributing to the achievement gap between more and less economically advantaged students (1).
- ✖ Children from low-income families have more restrictive access to books, both in school and at home, than their more advantaged peers (1).
- ✖ Lower-achieving readers read less in school and out of school than higher-achieving readers. Evidence points to a social-class effect here, with poor children having fewer reading opportunities (1).
- ✖ Better readers read more than poorer readers, supporting the importance of extensive, successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency (1).

McGill-Franzen and Allington (2004) also note that summer vacations, on average, “create an annual reading achievement gap of about three months between students from middle- and lower-class families . . . In other words, the reading achievement of children from low-income families declined between June and September while the achievement of more economically advantaged children remain stable or inched upward” (2). The result? By the end of the sixth grade, summer reading loss alone creates a reading gap of eighteen months.

If we are serious about preventing summer reading loss, then we have to get serious about discussing how to motivate our students to read over the summer. One research study suggests that summer reading loss can be prevented if students read four to five books over the summer (Kim 2004). With this in mind, isn't it interesting that many school systems require students in the honors track to read over the summer, but often do not have any summer reading expectations for students in the nonhonors tracks? The irony, of course, is that the non-honors students are the students who most need summer reading. Why should we have high expectations only for advanced students, while less-proficient readers fall farther behind each summer?

The truth is that all students should be required to read in the summer. For example, I taught two ninth-grade classes last year, and it was arranged so that they would be my students again in the tenth grade. Because they would be returning to me after the summer, I was able to establish summer reading expectations. My students are assigned two high-interest books to read over the summer. One book, Victor Villaseñor's *Rain of Gold*, is chosen by me; the other is self-selected and is recreational in nature. If my students do not read over the summer, they will continue falling behind. We have to get creative in ways to prevent summer reading loss from occurring, and the scheduling of students with the same teacher for two years is one way to address this critical problem.

A final, but important, note about summer reading: though I agree with the honors-level philosophy of assigning required reading over the summer, and I agree that all students should be required to read over the summer, I disagree strongly about the types of summer reading assignments students are being asked to complete. Want to kill the love of reading in young readers? Then continue to assign *Hamlet* or *Great Expectations* for them to wrestle with on their own. Books such as *The Grapes of Wrath* should not be assigned during summer vacation, because reading these books without the guidance of a teacher becomes an exercise in frustration and futility for students. I have read *The Grapes of Wrath* three times, and each time I have discovered new thinking in it. Why would I expect a teenager to take it home and read it on her own for the first time?

Though we certainly want to develop academic readers, summer is not the time to do so. Instead, summer is the time when educators should be focused on developing recreational reading habits in young students. Summer is the time our students should be reading high-interest (and high-quality) fiction and nonfiction. Summer is the time our students should be curling up with *Tuesdays with Morrie* or *Fast Food Nation*. We should be putting high-interest, accessible books into their hands: *The Kite Runner*, not *Heart of Darkness*. Our goal should be to nurture young readers, not to kill them.

Many Schools Have Removed Novels and Other Longer Challenging Works to Provide Teachers and Students with More Test Preparation Time

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the dangers of eliminating longer, challenging works from the curriculum. With this in mind, here is what you can do to prevent readicide:

Challenge all students with difficult text. Teachers have a duty to challenge students with complex novels and longer works. We are English teachers, not English assigners, and as such, we are paid to get in our classroom and present texts that stretch our students' thinking. It is our job to work our students through text that is a little bit too hard for them. It's not the difficult novels that are the problem; it's how they are taught that is the problem. (Specific, effective strategies that challenge students with difficult text will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.)

Recognize the difference between liking a text and gleaning value from a text. Get over the notion of students liking the book. Before I teach *1984*, for example, I already know some of my students will like the novel and some of my students will not like the novel. Let's face it: some students are not going to like a dark, science fiction dystopia that ends with all humanity being snuffed out. Frankly, I don't really care if they like it. What I care about is that all my students see the value in reading *1984* and that the novel has a lot to say to the modern reader. As an adult, I am a different person because I have read *1984*. I see my government differently, I consider privacy issues differently, and I have a heightened sense of propaganda and language manipulation—all because I have read this novel. This is not the same as liking the novel. Students may or may not like the novel, but I want all of them to understand the value that comes from reading it—a value that will help them become smarter people long after they leave school.

Make sure teachers and administrators are aware of the damage done to adolescents when students' brains are not stretched by longer, challenging works. Remember Maryanne Wolf's (2007) warning that all adolescents go through key developmental brain stages and that when they are not stretched in these periods of life their cognitive windows run the risk of shutting down. Be the lead person on your campus and in your district in making sure that curricular decision-makers understand what is at stake—that a short, choppy curriculum can damage our students' ability to think long after they leave the K–12 school system. Share the research found on page 51 of this chapter. For additional support, share some of the excellent research found in David Sousa's *How the Brain Learns to Read* (2004), Patricia Wolfe's *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice* (2004), and Eric Jensen's *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (2005).

Testing pressures aside, most administrators and teachers want to do what is in the best, long-term interest of kids. However, many of them are unaware of what brain research says about removing novels in favor of test preparation

materials. On behalf of your students, it may be up to you to raise the consciousness of administrators.

Students Are Not Doing Enough Reading in School

What you can do:

Conduct your own research to find out how much students are reading in your school. Recently, I asked my students to chart how much reading they actually did in their classes as they worked through a typical school day. After a six-hour school day, my freshman students read an average of seventeen minutes in one school day; my seniors averaged thirteen minutes (these totals excluded my English class). Interesting, but not surprising, was the finding that students in the honors classes by far read the most. Students in the nonhonors tracks (those who most need reading practice) read the least. This is in line with many studies that have found that in a typical school day students aren't doing much reading.

I am not sure that teachers from across the curriculum are aware of how little reading their students are actually doing. Make them aware. Conduct your own study and share the results with your faculty. (I was careful not to ask for teachers' names in my informal study.) Remind teachers that for many of our students, school is the only place they'll have the opportunity to develop reading skills. If our schools do not demand that our students get lots of reading practice (both academic and recreational reading experiences), they will not become readers. Remind your peers that we are not simply content-area teachers. We are all literacy teachers as well, and as such, it is a moral imperative that we provide a setting in which tons of reading occurs. Piano players need to play a lot before they become good piano players. Readers need to read a lot before they become good readers. This should be nonnegotiable. Unfortunately, I have found that schools have become such extremely busy places that authentic reading experiences are often buried under lectures, group work, films, worksheets, and test preparation. Raising your faculty's awareness of this problem is the first step in addressing the lack of reading occurring on campus.