

School Libraries and Reluctant Readers

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Abstract

School librarians, teachers, and families face reluctant readers and the question of “How do I move my student from a reluctant reader to an enthusiastic reader?” A reluctant reader can mean someone who hasn’t found a genre they like, they’re bored with the class book choice, unsure where to begin in finding a book, has a learning disability, can’t visualize the story, or anything that makes them not all that interested in reading. School librarians, teachers, and families need to work together to change the negative attitudes and feelings that students may have about books and reading. Combining nontraditional and traditional teaching strategies in both the library and in the classroom will assist students in becoming enthusiastic readers. This paper proposes the following methods to assist librarians, teachers, and family member in helping their students: the teacher reading aloud, reader choice and classic cannon literature, and developing and designing classrooms and libraries book collections and spaces differently. The core value of the American Association of School Libraries is that “reading is the core of personal and academic competency.” This paper strives to change the current trend of reluctant readers in society.

Key words: reluctant reader, librarian, school libraries, reading, literacy, reader choice, cannon, read-aloud, library design, classroom design, book collection

School Libraries and Reluctant Readers

School librarians, teachers, and families face reluctant readers throughout the student's tenure in education. The question that both parties must answer is, "How do I move my student from a reluctant reader to an enthusiastic reader?" To answer this question, librarians, teachers, and families need to understand what a reluctant reader is, according to Lexia Learning's post (2008):

A reluctant reader is, quite simply, any student who does not show an interest in reading. These students may actively resist reading, mask their dislike by clowning around or misbehaving when asked to read, become easily frustrated during reading, or need to be coaxed into picking up a book. Identifying reluctant readers is the first step in better engaging these students as readers...it is important to note that reluctant readers are not necessarily the same as struggling readers. Although their reading abilities may vary, these young people have trouble connecting with books independently. (para. 1)

School librarians, teachers, and families need to work together to create an atmosphere that is engaging and encouraging for all students. By cooperating with and assisting one another, librarians, teachers, and families can begin to change the fear and hesitancy that students may have about books and reading. Research shows that by including nontraditional teaching strategies in both the library, the classroom, and at home, it will assist students in becoming enthusiastic readers. Different methods are being used throughout schools and their libraries as well as in family homes, such as teacher or caregiver read-aloud, the student making their own book choice mixed with cannon literature, the development of libraries and their book collections, and designing classrooms and libraries differently. Each of these methods is all used to various degrees to promote the core value of the American Association of School Libraries –

that "reading is the core of personal and academic competency" (para. 5). If there is a continuation to teach books and reading as has been done in the past without making changes that positively impact the students, then there will continue to be a proliferation of reluctant readers.

Reading has long been an essential part of children's education. In 1997, the National Reading Panel was formed by Congress to analyze the current research and evidence available to discern what were the best methods of teaching reading to students (Child Development and Behavior Branch, para. 1). The findings from the research and evidence resulted in a list of techniques that the panel deemed essential to integrate and combine in teaching reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, guided oral reading, teaching vocabulary words, and reading comprehension strategies (para. 8). Congress convened this panel in 1999, what followed has been a striving for and desiring that education and literacy for America's children come first. Since then, teaching literacy has become a political agenda; according to Davenport and Jones (2005), they state:

Playing out literacy on the national political stage reframes everything —the issues, the vocabulary, and the cast of characters. Literacy is not merely a problem now; it is a crisis. Improving literacy is not just an educational or social need; it is essential if the United States is to compete in the new global economy. Everyone seems ready to declare war on the enemy — illiteracy —but experts define and measure the problem differently and propose varied methods of attack. In fact, the several combatants in the war on illiteracy seem to expend as much ammunition firing on one another as they do in attacking the problem. The politicians in Washington, the scholars in their ivory towers, the vested interests in our communities, and the teachers and students in the trenches all seem to be

warring among themselves at the same time they are trying to combat the common enemy. (p.46)

This policy review, written fifteen years ago, is still accurate today. However, it is not illiteracy alone; that is the issue. The issue is that many students are not illiterate, but rather, are reluctant in their reading because the enjoyment of reading is missing from the library, classroom, and home. As librarians, teachers, and families, we do not want to continue this "fighting amongst ourselves" that Davenport and Jones write about. Instead, we need to work together in providing various methods and opportunities that allow students to fall in love with reading.

One method to implement in three areas of a student's life (i.e., library, class, and home) is a read-aloud done by the librarian, teacher, or family member. Typically read-aloud is seen as storytime for little kids with picture books and not something to continue to do as the child grows. However, Katie Ciesla (2016) who primarily teaches reluctant readers writes:

Imagine a read-aloud: students becoming engaged with and lost in the story they are experiencing, the voice of the teacher fluctuating with emotion and character change as students sit on the edge of their seats, waiting to hear what is coming next. This is exactly how read-aloud affects student attitudes. (p. 523)

Students who become engrossed in the story want to know what happens; next, their attitude towards reading begins to change in a positive direction. They are allowed to imagine the story and characters without feeling the pressure of reading a book they were not previously interested in reading. When the story is being read aloud in a captivating manner, when the librarian, teacher, or family member becomes a storyteller, the book can come alive in a way it was not able to for the reluctant reader. Which led to a change in Katie Ciesla's classroom,

This class had been transformed by the power of read-aloud. Students had been able to travel to faraway destinations without ever leaving their seats, meet new friends who lived inside the pages of texts, and experience emotions with characters that they never knew were possible. These students now knew what reading a good book felt like. (p. 523)

Read-aloud may not work with every book or in every setting, but it can allow students the opportunity to hear the book and understand it better. Audiobooks and read-aloud are similar in that the reader can still finish and picture a book while listening to the narrator to provide the inflection and emotion described in the story. The difference between the two is that the students can then discuss it with one another almost immediately, and everyone will be at the same stopping point.

One of the biggest debates in the world of literacy education is the idea between reader choice and cannon or classic literature. In schools across the country, teachers assign students to read specific books, labeled as classics in literature. However, those books can be a cause of reluctant reading. When Holly Koreby interviewed a student for her article (2019) about the classic book *Lord of the Flies*, he responded: "It's a classic for some reason, but I don't know what that reason is. Because it's not good," says Calvin, a graduating senior, who laughed when I asked if he finished it (para. 3). This opinion of the student does not necessarily mean that *Lord of the Flies* is a bad book; not every book is going to be enjoyed by every reader. However, how do librarians, teachers, and families find a balance between cannon texts that have literary expert backing and have been staples in the classroom for years and student choice, where students may pick books that are on subjects that they are already familiar with and do not expand their knowledge of the world and the issues found in other classic literature?

The answer does not lie on either side of reader choice versus classic literature debate. Instead, it is in the middle of both of these sides. Pamela Beck writes about this issue (2014) and states, "It is pointless for teachers to provide one source of information to a classroom filled with readers of multiple levels, abilities, and interests. Reading materials should be varied just as readers themselves are varied" (p. 13). There needs to be diversity in the reading selections for the students; they need to see people in the story that look like them and are going through the same issues (Truax, 2010, p.3). This diversity is in both classic and more contemporary fiction. The argument that only by reading classics will students talk about deeper issues begins to fall short when one looks at how many books written today tackle the topics of race, feminism, inequality, immigration, and so much more. What further makes reading classics more difficult for students than it needs to be, is the amount of time spent on the book, to the point that the analysis and assignment attached to the book take longer than the amount of time spent reading the book itself. Donalyn Miller (2011) wrote that,

Yes, students benefit from the deep analysis of literature that a thorough look at one book provides, but there needs to be a balance between picking a book apart to examine its insides and experiencing the totality of what a book offers. There are other paths to teaching critical analysis and reading skills than belaboring one book for weeks. Let's not lose sight of our greater goal: inspiring students to read over the long haul. (p. 125)

No matter our role in a student's life, there is still the common goal of cultivating an enthusiastic reader for life. One can accomplish this cultivation by using both reader choice and classic literature.

Libraries and classrooms can also apply the idea of expanding the books made available that students can choose from with their book collections. Librarians and teachers can work

together in creating both the school library book collection and personal classroom libraries.

Williams (2017) noted that to decrease the off-task behavior of reluctant readers during

Sustained Silent reading,

Teachers could work toward building a classroom library with a greater variety of reading material at various reading levels or have students spend time with the school's reading specialist or librarian to select texts. At the very least, it would seem prudent to include more adventure and mystery books in the classroom. It is fairly easy to identify popular books by consulting lists put out by booksellers, publishers, librarians, and young adult readers themselves. (p. 17)

Not all students enjoy the same book or can read at the same level. Therefore, there needs to be a wide range of genres and reading levels made available in their library to choose from (Gilson, 2018, p. 507). Librarians and teachers can find books for students of all reading levels by researching different publishing companies and working with one another in their book knowledge. Libraries must include books of all reading levels for all grade levels, in all genres to appeal to every student. No librarian or teacher should want a student to feel left out or "other" when they walk into a library. Therefore, librarians and teachers need to be aware of different publishing companies that provide "high-interest, low-reading level (hi-lo) fiction for those readers facing literacy issues" (Orca Book, para.3). By working together, librarians and teachers can provide a large selection of books for their students, while also ensuring that they are not doubling up on series or book titles in the library and classroom and staying within their budget.

Another factor in having a wide range of books from authors of all different cultures and backgrounds is that it allows the student to see themselves in the story. Representation in libraries matter. When Wayne Brinda (2011) was researching how to "help [students] value the

process of reading so that they could understand and enjoy unfamiliar books assigned in school," he found that "helping students find and express personal connections with the text became vital to creating enjoyment. Enjoyment is more than liking a book. It is finding and affirming personal reasons to keep reading the book" (pp. 8, 13). Students need to be able to connect with the story they are reading, and that is easier when there is a wide selection. If teachers have an in-class library for their students, the teacher and librarian need to talk with one another so that they are not buying duplicate copies or sets of books that the other already owns. By communicating with one another, this helps alleviate the problem that most schools have, not having the financial budget to afford a wide selection of books. It also allows for more book choices in the school for the students and teachers.

No matter the size and diversity of a book collection on campus, the layout and design of both the classroom and the library can either encourage or dissuade a student from wanting to read. In Paulette Stewart's case study (2018), they found that,

Space needs to be flexible to accommodate both current and evolving pedagogies. In addition, the library's space should be created to energize and inspire learners and tutors, encourage their development and also be enterprising, to make each area capable of supporting different purposes. (para. 15)

When designing a space, it is vital to make it inviting and comfortable for the students and teachers. The design can include creating a cozy reading section with comfortable furniture, displaying books of all genres and reading levels in permanent displays, and doing book talks with classes, and then displaying those books for students to check out when they visit. By creating an environment that is inviting for students, they will feel comfortable hanging out in the library, which may involve reading books, talking with friends, doing homework, or other

school-related activities. While students are in the library, the librarian needs to walk around and interact with the students. This interaction will allow the librarian to assist students, ask personalized reference questions, and build a repertoire as an adult they can go to for help with homework, research, and book choices (Treistman, 2017, p. 27).

Reluctant readers exist everywhere and can be anyone at different times throughout their life. As librarians, teachers, and families, our desire to spark the joy and love of reading into the students we know, should propel us into making positive changes in how we approach reading and books. Students need to know that books are not dull, out of touch, or only have characters that do not depict anyone like them. Through working together, it is possible to start some of these methods in the school, classroom, and home library. The fear and hesitancy a student may have will not disappear immediately, but if nothing changes, then that student will be less likely to become an enthusiastic reader. Librarians and teachers need to incorporate both traditional and nontraditional activities and lessons into their curriculum and book collections to encourage students to read. By implementing some of these changes: read-aloud, reader's choice and cannon literature, developing libraries and book collections, and making design changes to classrooms and libraries, into the library, school, or home, this can begin to answer, "How do I move my student from a reluctant reader to an enthusiastic reader?"

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