TEACHING THE READING LIFE: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

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ABSTRACT

Teachers can foster a love of reading in their students by regularly modeling their own reading lives. This sort of modeling involves both helping students to develop reading skills and sharing personal stories that illustrate the importance of reading in adulthood. The present study describes the impact of purposefully sharing my personal reading life with my first-grade students in a suburban elementary school. I first identified as a problem of practice in this classroom students' unawareness of my reading habits outside of school. Over a semester, I introduced my students to the books that I was currently reading and was planning to read next in a display case. The following discussion provides an overview of the creation of this reading display, its use in daily interactions with my students, and its impact on the students' attitudes toward and practice of reading.

When their teachers are active readers, students are more likely to learn and display effective reading practices (Brooks, 2007). When teachers bring their experiences and passion into the classroom, they show their students what a reading life is and positively impact long-term interest in reading (Miller, 2009). Applegate and Applegate (2004) cautioned, however, that it is not enough for teachers to just simply be readers; in order to instill a love of reading in their students, they must demonstrate their own love of it. In exploring these issues, the present study builds on the work of Fountas and Pinnell (2000), who argued that being a reader means reading voluntarily, recommending books to others, knowing a range of authors and illustrators, and reflecting on what is read by making connections and thinking critically.

According to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory regarding the relationship between readers and texts, the meaning of a text resides in neither the text nor the reader alone but rather comes into being through the interactions between them. During these interactions, readers choose a stance that guides their selective attention and their purpose for reading. This theory distinguished two types of stances that readers can take. The efferent stance involves a conception of reading where the purpose is gathering information. Miller (2009) explains teachers who assume an efferent stance "may never talk to their students about loving books and craving reading, but tell them instead about the need to read well to get along in school and in life" (p. 109). The aesthetic stance, by contrast, involves a conception of reading as an emotional and intellectual journey. Teachers who assume an aesthetic stance encourage their students to become absorbed in a text

and to relate the material to their own lives. Earlier scholars, such as Renouf (1990), also spoke of an aesthetic stance that nurtures and enhances readers' emotional interactions with texts. Ruddell (1995) likewise asserted that an aesthetic stance has the potential to motivate students to read, increase their attention, and aid in the formation of mental representations that enhance reading comprehension and help students to make the most of instruction.

Becoming Aware

As a reader and an early childhood advocate who views reading as a gift, I seek to communicate my enthusiasm for reading in order to instill the same enthusiasm in my students. In particular, I want my students, as their reading identities expand, to develop a love of this valuable activity and engage deeply with the texts that they read. I was surprised, therefore, during a recent class when, in the midst of discussing a book, my students responded with puzzled gazes and blank stares when I shared that I had read *Wish Tree* (Applegate, 2017) over the weekend. I was surprised at their reaction because I had always assumed that my students were aware of my reading life. Breaking the silence, a student named Rey (all names are pseudonyms) raised her hand and said, "I never knew you read books at home, too. I thought that's only what kids did." Stunned, I looked to the others and asked whether they were aware that I read outside of our classroom, and another student, Kate, concurred: "I thought you only read at school. I didn't know you really liked to read."

For days following this exchange, I kept reflecting on the fact that my six- and seven-year-old students were compartmentalizing reading as an activity that mainly took place at school and was performed by children. At length, I realized that I needed to look no further than my class schedule to understand how my students could come to this conclusion. I saw that the time that I devoted to sharing my reading life was limited and, in practice, often neglected owing to other scheduling demands. Rather than authentically sharing my passion, I found that I had been repeatedly telling my students about the importance of reading and the behaviors of good readers and encouraging them to find time to read outside of school. However, I had never demonstrated for them how reading impacts my daily life and the joy that it brings me, which is why I wanted them to become life-long readers. In failing to share my own reading life, it occurred to me, I was reinforcing the adage, "Do as I say, not as I do."

These concerns have received some attention from scholars. Thus, in a yearlong study, Cremin et al. (2009) examined teachers' personal knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a reader, thereby building on research by Commeyras, Bisplinghoff, and Olson (2003) about the "reading teacher," that is, a teacher who reads and a reader who teaches. Through professional development and action research, Cremin et al. (2009) sought to develop teachers' knowledge of children's literature, their confidence in using literature in the classroom and awareness of their roles as reading teachers, and relationships among readers within and beyond school. As the teachers who participated in that study reflected on their own reading, they began to reframe their practice; thus,

by sharing their reading lives, they demonstrated to young readers the pleasure that reading can bring and formed new relationships with them through discussions of texts.

Similarly, as McCracken and McCracken (1978) explained, a teacher models reading not simply by becoming engrossed in a text but also with regard to his or her responses to a text. It is, then, important for teachers to talk about what they have read and to share ideas that they have encountered in texts. These researchers found that when teachers read passages from stories aloud to their classes to share the author's exact words, the students began to do the same thing. At the same time, they urged teachers to not require anything from children that they would not do themselves willingly and naturally—which means eliminating such activities as book reports, listing unfamiliar words, and filling out worksheets. Instead, students should talk about the pleasure of reading and the ideas that they encounter. It was also suggested in the study that children who see adults reading may not understand all that is involved, for which reason teachers should make clear what they do during and after reading, serving as models for their students.

Having reflected on my experience in the classroom and the literature on "reading teachers," I wanted to create a classroom practice that would communicate my reading habits outside the classroom to my students. In other words, I looked for a means of positioning myself as a reading role model and sharing my life-long reading habits. I wanted to show students the joy that reading can bring in contexts other than those in which they usually see me.

The Book Display in Action

In order to model my reading life and reframe my teaching practice, I decided to make my actions clear after by creating a reading display (see Figure 1). The purpose of the display was to showcase my reading life in a concrete way and so that I could serve as a more complete example for my young students. I displayed three books: 1) the book that I had most recently finished reading; 2) the book that I was currently reading, and; 3) the book that I planned to read next. My choice to construct the display in this way was informed by Miller's (2009) description of lifelong readers as individuals who nearly always are currently reading a book. The display offered a new perspective for students who had not had the opportunity to make future reading plans and may not have known where to start considering their future choices or how to narrow them down. The reading display took the form of a ledge on which I placed a copy of each book under a label reading either "Finished," "Right Now," or "Next." I then used this tool in my classroom as a means to share my reading life.

Figure 1. Reading Display

INTRODUCING THE READING DISPLAY. Having established that my students were largely unaware of my reading life in the conversation previously discussed, I employed the display as a physical reading model for my students. The following account of my initial interactions with my students after they had been introduced to the display makes clear the interest that it inspired.

> **Teacher**: I would like to share with you my reading list. I just finished reading *The World According to Humphrey* (Birney, 2004). As soon as I finished reading that book, I started reading *Chopsticks* (Rosenthal, 2012) because I really liked the book *Spoon* (Rosenthal, 2009), which is by the same author. Also, I already know the book that I am going to read next; it's *The First Marathon* (Reynolds, 2006). That's right, I already have my next book picked out and ready to go. I chose this book because I like to run, and I think that this book will be really interesting and teach me more about the sport that I enjoy. I have labeled each book so that you can see what I am reading, and I will change it every time I finish a book.
>
> **Josh** (studying the ledge): Is that the book you're reading right now? You're really reading that book?
>
> **Teacher**: Yes, I am really reading this book. I think that I will finish it tomorrow, and then I will start reading the next book. I will move the books on the ledge, and you will see which book I have chosen as my next book to read.
>
> **Josh** (eying the next book to be read): You haven't read *The First Marathon* yet, so can I read that book now? I really want to read it before you.

Teacher: Of course you can. We can talk about it after we both finish reading it.

Josh: I just really want to read it before you because you haven't read it yet!

Rey: Can I look at the book you already finished reading? I think the cover looks interesting. Did you like it?

Teacher: I really did. When you're finished, we can talk about why I liked it, and you can share what you thought.

Josh: I will look tomorrow and see what the next book is. I wonder if it's one I have read.

Merga (2016) advised that students should be aware that their teachers like to read and do so actively when not at school. In order to create this awareness, teachers need to talk about reading as a pleasurable activity whenever possible. In this case, the reading display provided the necessary point of departure for sharing the important place of reading in my life. Whenever I finished the book identified as "Right Now," moved it under the "Finished" label, and added a new book under the "Next" label, I was careful to draw their attention to the fact through an intentional talk.

The students' attention to the display was evident. Kate told me one afternoon, "You forgot to change the book you are reading." Wanting to build on this moment, I walked with her to the display and pointed out that the book positioned under the "Right Now" label had numerous chapters. I explained, "This is a longer book, and it will take more time to finish. You will see it move as soon as I finish it." Kate examined the width of the book and then placed it back on the ledge. "That makes sense," she said. "It might take forever to finish!" I laughed and shared with her that it was my hope to finish the book over the weekend. In this case, the visual reading display provided a context in which my students could feel comfortable discussing my reading life, which became noticeable and familiar to them.

NEXT BOOK. In the same manner, as the display kept my students alerted to the time that I spent reading, they began to adopt the practice of choosing a book to read next. The example provided by the display was especially powerful for students who had no similar experience with books that could inform their future reading. Thus, the sequence of books became the basis for a classroom routine, with students self-selecting books to sustain their independent reading during our reading workshop. At one point, however, one student, Jean, revealed that she was stuck and did not know how to be thoughtful in making her next selection. Noting that her book bin was sparse, I chose to use the reading display as support for my inquiry into her plans.

Teacher: It looks like you are almost finished with the book you're reading. Do you know what you're going to read next?

Jean: No, I'm afraid I'll get distracted by the books that I have waiting for me and not finish what I'm reading. I'll wait to pick out my next book because I don't know what else to read.

Teacher: Sometimes the book that I'm going to read next is in a series, and it makes me happy to know the story will continue. When I read books in a series, I can't wait to see what will happen next. It really makes me happy to know that the story will continue.

Jean: I think I have a book picked out to read next, but it gets harder when you don't know what you're going to read next. You might have to read something you don't want to read because you don't know. But you can read the book you just finished again while you wait to pick out another one.

As McCarthey and Moje (2002) explained, readers come to understand themselves by engaging in literacy. Thus, through the reading display, Jean was able to reflect on her apprehension regarding the choice of her next book. I took up the subject again with Jean the next day by asking whether she had, in fact, selected her next book. She said that she had: "I picked this book because of the front of the book. I think I will like it, but I am not sure if I will like it." Taking the opportunity to establish common ground with my student, I shared a recent struggle that I had had with planning my reading. One evening, I told Jean, I was discussing the book that I was currently reading with friends, and one of them, a fellow lover of books, recommended a book. Though this was not a book that I would normally pick up, I began reading it with high expectations based on the recommendation; after several chapters, though, I was still unable to appreciate the author's writing style. As I shared this story, Jean leaned in and hung on my every word, anxiously wanting to know what I did next. I shared with her that I had put the book down and still had not finished it. Her eyes grew wide with surprise. By being honest and sharing a real struggle, I had captured her attention in a genuine way and been able to make a teaching point. In this moment, as Jean was beginning to know me as a reader, I was growing as well by getting a better sense of her reading life.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS. According to Commeyras et al. (2003), in order to become engaged readers, students must see others enjoying the experience of reading. In an effort to adjust my practice as it related to sharing my life as a reader, I hypothesized that, once the reading display had become an established practice, students would begin sharing their own reading lives with one another. To my satisfaction, they did indeed start thinking about the plans of their peers.

Thus Andy, having just finished a book on the solar system, excitedly announced to me, "I know Rey would love this book. She likes books about planets, and I think she would like to read this next." Honored that someone had thought about her reading preferences enough to offer her a suggestion, Rey accepted the book from Andy without hesitation, telling him, "I can't wait to read this book. Thanks!" The other students, having witnessed this exchange, were intrigued and asked to borrow the book so that they could learn and take part in the conversation and discover what others found so interesting. In the words of Commeyras and colleagues (2003), "There's something really special about a friend of yours giving you a book and telling you they can't wait for you to read it so you can talk about it" (p. 14).

As was revealed in my discussion with Jean, I too have a social life that revolves around reading and includes friends who are always ready to offer a recommendation. These are the readers whom I look to when my list of books needs to be refreshed. Reading is a fundamental part of my relationships with these friends, and our conversations always leave me wanting to explore texts that I otherwise would not have considered. I want my students likewise to experience reading as a social activity, starting within the context of our classroom community.

Seeking to maintain the momentum created by the exchange reported above, I asked Andy and Rey to share what they had learned together. They eagerly discussed their interest in the solar system and what they had learned from the book. Listening intently, members of the class began raising their hands with questions about the solar system for our newly minted experts. In an instant, our classroom had become alive with conversation, all thanks to a simple book recommendation. This experience corroborates the assertion by Kiuru et al. (2017) that time spent talking to peers with shared interests in reading can foster a sense of belonging and reinforce students' thoughts, values, and identities as readers.

Next Steps

As a reader, then, I was able to share with my students both the nature of my reading life and what being a lifelong reader means to me. A small but meaningful change in my practice had a significant impact on my classroom, as I was further motivated to read outside of the classroom in order to maintain students' interest in the reading display. In doing so, I had to prioritize my recreational reading to strengthen the instructional aesthetic stance that, I found, positively impacted my literacy instruction. Further, in sharing my reading life, I carved out classroom time for the discussion of students' reading lives in a new way. Refusing to allow perceived priorities to hinder my growth as an educator, I took control over this portion of my day by examining what was stealing those precious moments away.

Moving forward, I plan to introduce the reading display at the beginning of the year and to encourage students to set goals as readers based on this model. As I continue modeling my own reading life openly, I will also search for additional ways to learn about each of my students as readers and ways in which I can assist them on their personal journeys. Simply put, it is not enough for teachers to read recreationally and tell their students that they enjoy reading; they need to make their reading life experiences visible. In implementing the reading display, I have had the opportunity to witness the influence that sharing my reading life and the value that I place on it can have on my students. This, I think, is the kind of growth that Lassonde, Stearns, and Dengler (2005) had in mind when they called on professionals like me to be "teachers who read and readers who teach" (p. 43).

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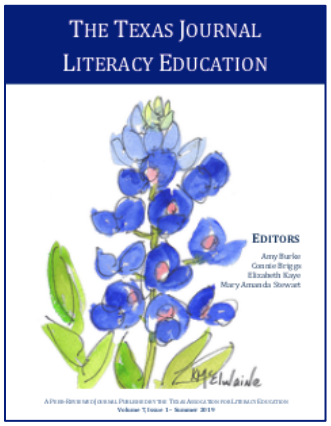

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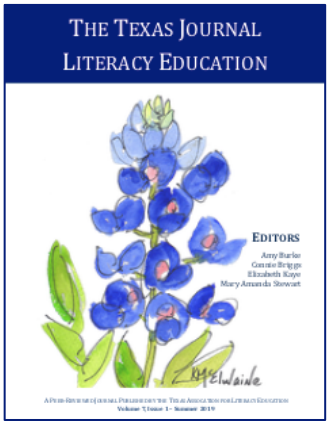

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