

Literacy Leads

It's That Time: It's About Choice
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It's that time of year again, the time when my natural patterns of chi get blocked. The time when my husband has to pull me back from talking to perfect strangers about what books to buy their kids. The time of year when I ask students to set personal goals and they tell me they want to make more AR points. The time when teachers and librarians spend countless hours labeling and sorting their books by lexile levels. The time when I try explaining a complex process in television sound bites.

I have to tell you, I just don't understand. We "level" books; we "level" kids. What exactly does that mean? I also don't understand this culture we've created of establishing an expensive, time-consuming AR reading "program" instead of simply teaching kids how to find books they want to read and spending the money for software and tests on books.

No one taught me how to select what to read. Still curious about that. I was handed books all the way through school and being as compliant as I am, I read them. I never thought to ask how the teachers found those books, some of which I really loved. Worse, I read every thing assigned to me in the SRA kit, self-checked, and learned how to cheat.

I didn't become a reader in my eyes until I picked up Mosaic of Thought 12 years ago! From Keene and Zimmermann, I learned and started practicing the proficient reader strategies to improve my comprehension.

From Margaret Mooney, I learned about reading different levels of books. (1) I read books and magazines below my reading level. These are materials where I can read almost every word without help. From reading "easy" books, I gain confidence, fluency, and enjoyment. (2) I read challenging books sometimes. I scan pages, photos, or captions. I read along with others and try to understand new information with their help. I listen to books on tape or listen to others read aloud. From "hard" books, I learn new vocabulary, story structures, and enthusiasm for what's coming next. (3) I read just-right books sometimes. When I don't know a couple words per page, I practice the strategies I've learned. From practicing, I tackle harder and harder

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books with experience and get in that reading zone. Who hasn't felt rusty when summer hits and we finally have time to read? But, it's hard to sit still and do it!

So, I can't imagine taking The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century (Friedman) to the beach! But, I can envision listening to it in my car. I've "read" some pretty hard stuff in my car that I would never be able to tackle when I have lots of fun distractions around like television and the phone and people! I love to read People Magazine. I don't want to admit it; I actually hate the idea that people are rewarded to follow celebrities around. So, I won't buy a subscription. I do, however, indulge when I'm getting my hair cut. From reading People, I can hold my own in a conversation in places where teachers gather or make small talk at a party.

A French teacher in one of my workshops put it this way. (I'm paraphrasing.) *When I came to the United States, I spoke and read very little English. I made myself read 10 minutes of English books a day. However, I had my French books with me and I read 2 hours every day from them. Eventually, I read more English and less French. If any one had told what I had to read, I would have given up. I would have hated reading.*

By the same kind of trial and error, I began learning who I was as a reader.

(I love historical fiction and endings really are important to me!) Then, I joined a book club. My group selected books together and from them, I branched into different genres and got out of reading ruts. I tried reading titles I would never have read left on my own.

Now, I have some habits that serve me well. I ask others what they read. I collect Top 100 lists from newspapers and – yep – People magazine that summarize books for me. I make lists of what I want to read. At the library, I reserve new books if they catch my eye. They don't come in for over a year sometimes, but that's a great surprise when they do. I learned to read more than one book at a time! And, oh my gosh, I learned I could read a book more than once. I also make sure I always have a book on tape. So, I make trips to the library and read about potential good books online. I reserve those at the library as well. On occasion, I find authors I love and read every thing they have written. Sometimes that works out well. Sometimes, I'm surprised by how uneven their writing is and I'm disappointed.

No one rewards me for reading. I also don't take any tests, thank goodness! I don't know my lexile level and I don't know what level the books I'm reading are either. However, after a lifetime of reading sporadically, now I'm never without a book. Understanding how to select books from a variety of levels (when unnumbered) helped me. Studying and talking about reading helped, for sure. Experimenting has been crucial. Following the leads of others is a part.

Like I said, I didn't learn these habits in school, but everyone should!

Therefore, as the keepers of our reading programs, we must ask ourselves this over-arching question: Will our children continue to read after they leave our classrooms and how do we know?

Once we answer that question, I offer others for reflection. The answers to these questions may reveal our students' reading habits and/or the culture we're creating. Then, we need to make changes as appropriate for each student and her needs. (See sidebar.)

So that's why my chi is off at this time of year. Enticing children to read is challenging right now. Sometimes buying programs or creating lots of rules seems like the perfect solution. It may take a year of reflection with colleagues, but it's time to ask these tough questions and make appropriate adjustments. What could be more important?

Please read and then recommend to parents...
<http://tinyurl.com/nklsor> **New York Times**

Reflection Questions When Considering Independent-Reading Instruction

- Are we holding conversations as a class about how to choose books we like?
- Even if we are required to “do a program” in our school, are we balancing it with other models of finding books? (Even the AR manual says if the same children are going to the reward parties, the adults in the school need to re-do their model. The point is not to reward students who came to us reading but to entice nonreaders to read.)
- Have we refused to offer parents a number that “measures” a child’s reading level? Instead, can parents help their child choose books appropriately using the 3-levels of books model?
- Are students taking tests to assess whether they read their books or not? Why? Reading = tests? Can they respond in more authentic ways?
- Are there children who consistently are not rewarded for their reading habits? Are we differentiating for them?
- Have we established a way or time for students to recommend books to one another?
- Are children asking each other about books more than the classroom teacher?
- Are children allowed to make mistakes when choosing books (so that they learn about this process)? What do they do and to whom do they talk when selecting a book doesn't work?
- Are we setting “rules” for what to read and what not to read? Why? Are we periodically examining the unintended consequences (like cheating) of the rules?
- Are children “losing” their books or wandering the room during reading time? Has someone visited the library 1-on-1 with those children to demonstrate how to find books they want to read?
- Has our class discussed when it's okay to abandon a book? Have they established a guideline?
- Are students reading many different kinds of books at the same time? At many different levels – even books considered too hard or too easy?
- Are some children consistently selecting books that are too easy or too hard for them to read? Do we know why?
- Are kids encouraged to read a book a second time even within one school year?
- Do children have a collection of reading materials from which to read when there's time?
- Do students know how to select a book from a bookstore or library where the books are not leveled?