NO NEED TO REINVENT THE WHEEL:

Reading Instruction in a Time of Change

By Ann D. David and Katrina Jansky

Abstract: In Texas, it's an era of uncertainty: new TEKS, changes to STAAR, school finance. What's a teacher to do? How can teachers avoid reinventing the reading curriculum every time a change rolls around? Reflecting on the foundations of reading instruction—time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines—offers a way to answer these challenging questions. This article connects each of these touchstones to theory and research as well as discusses brief strategies that support each principle. The article also offers teacher commentary on each principle. Finally, the authors argue that the heart of reading instruction doesn't change: it is readers falling in love with books.

Keywords: reading, reading instruction, reading workshop

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Every August, teachers are confronted with seismic changes that intrude on plans and practices. As we are drafting this very article, the revision of the English Language Arts TEKS is winding its way toward completion. The draft as of March is a reorganization of the current four strands into seven different strands that all include reading, writing, speaking, and listening. (Did we just hear an audible sigh?) What about the 2017 Legislative Session? Legislation in both the House and Senate has great potential to make schooling in Texas very different for better or worse. These few examples don't even address federal education policy or new policies schools and districts will adopt. We can't predict the future, though we're certain change is coming.

What is a teacher to do? In the midst of all this change, where is the time for reflecting on what's good for students' reading lives? What motivates students to become readers? And where is the time to reflect on teaching practice and to change it to better support students' learning? How can teachers avoid reinventing the wheel each August? In this article, we offer an answer: dig back into reading literature. And (because there's always an "and") teach reading, like Kelly Neal does, so that students fall in love with reading and books.

> At first [students] tend to gravitate to "the classic" high school novels; books they have heard of like *Pride and Prejudice, Old Man and the Sea, 1984.* I try to help them find books which would have a higher interest to them as readers and still maintain the "academic" imprimatur. By spring, the students talk to each other about what they have been reading, and like normal readers, take each other's advice. Lots of Hurakami, Luis Urrea, Dave Eggers, Eugenides start appearing in class.
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> *—Kelly Neal, Ann Richard's School for Young Women Leaders, Austin ISD*

As we considered how to frame a discussion of reading literature with students, we acknowledge our debt to those reading teachers

and researchers who have gone before us and have laid the foundation we are revisiting and reflecting on here. In 1994, Nancie Atwell outlined choice, response, community, and structure as core elements of reading workshop instruction, and Donalyn Miller (2009) reminded her readers of those same elements. Jeff Wilhelm has called for being the book—engaging deeply with the world of literature—since the first edition of his book in 2007. Randy Bomer wrote in 1995 that "our most egregious errors [include] static interpretations of literary works over readers' strategies in constructing readings" (p. 100). And in 1977, Richard Allington identified the key problem that still exists in classrooms pushed and pulled by policy, standards, curriculum, and mandates: "While a myriad of instructional techniques and materials were employed [by teachers], little reading was accomplished" (p. x). Instead of all of these trappings of instruction, he reminded us that "to develop the ability to read fluently requires the opportunity to read" (p. x).

So, while our conversation about reading is not a new one, it is one we must return to again and again as teachers are continually buffeted by changes. We agree with Peter Johnston (2012) that "the expectation of change is very important, but in order to manage the idea of constant change, children also need to have a sense of stability, a sense of what they can count on" (p. 29). Teachers can cultivate this stability, for themselves and their students, by focusing on key principles in reading instruction: time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines. In this article, we connect each of these touchstones to theory and research as well as discuss brief strategies that support each principle. Finally, because we value teachers' voices, we include quotes from classroom teachers enacting these principles with readers in their classrooms.

Time

Teachers and students can both find that it is hard to make time for reading—for a student holding a text in hand and reading it without the pressure to answer questions at the end, write an analysis essay, complete a graphic organizer, or some other imposed task. Teachers feel the pressure to cover the district's curriculum and state standards. But covering the curriculum and teaching the standards do not equate to students becoming readers. Further, a linear march through the curriculum and standards sidelines the actual act of reading and benches the range of literatures available to be read. Furthermore, it is difficult to become a passionate and reflective reader when you're not given time to dig into a good book and read. Wilhelm and Smith (2016) show "that the immersive pleasure of play is absolutely necessary to engaged reading and is prerequisite to experiencing all the other pleasures, functions, and benefits of reading" (p. 27).

With time to read, students can build reading stamina and fluency, develop strategies to engage with text, and explore the worlds of literature. With time, students can also make mistakes, miss a key point or character detail, and slip into confusion and uncertainty. They "need the time to work through . . . problems. Time is the compost that generates the richest ideas" (Burke, 2013, p. 27). During work time, students learn to develop and follow differentiated and personalized agendas (Kaufman & Smith, 2001) that include time for reflection on reading struggles and achievement.

> Time to read in class slows the world down and allows for a natural strengthening of skills that can only be acquired through reading on one's own. Looking through my conference notes and observations I see how much it's personalized; students move at their own pace, build their stamina, and deepen their comprehension by self-reflecting. . . . My students own their reading when they have this time.
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> —*Crystal Kelley, Goodnight MS, San Marcos Consolidated ISD*

A concrete way we ensure the students are putting in the time reading is by limiting our instruction to a 10-minute minilesson. In her time as a middle school teacher, Katrina set a timer for 10 minutes and when it went off, no matter what, she turned the work over to her students. In setting this timer, though, instructional time is not lost; rather, it shifts from whole-class direct instruction to individual conferences while students are reading. Teachers teach sitting down (Murray, 1982) and respond to the individual needs of students in the midst of their reading work.

Choice

Learning how to select literature that fits you as a reader is reflective and rigorous work. It is also work that increases engagement and motivation (Dredger, 2008). Asking students to select their own books gives them the responsibility for the choice and what follows. Students want to resist choice, to pass the ball, because it is challenging. Moving through a series of hard choices about what book to read is exactly where students are learning to be readers because "embracing their inner reader starts with students selecting their own books to read" (Miller, 2009, p. 23).

Choice is not only hard for students, but it is hard for teachers. Teachers often tightly bind choices to ensure they make the right choice to cover the standards, to adhere to the curriculum, or to expose students to books everyone needs to read. When teachers

say, "You need to read a dystopian novel, either *Animal Farm* or *1984,*" the choice not authentic. We are deciding for the students that either *Animal Farm* or *1984* count as a quality dystopian novel, ignoring *Hunger Games, Divergent, Handmaid's Tale*, or *Alas, Babylon*. The unspoken question of choice can be framed as: Are we teaching readers or are we teaching novels? To the authors of this article, readers are the clear choice. Why readers? Because when we choose novels for readers, we let them know that their choices and interests are less valuable than "the curriculum" or the canon. And feeling devalued turns readers off.

> I've had students, parents, other teachers, and administrators mention how much they hated reading a particular book for their English class. . . . Choice reading focuses on reading skills. When students enjoy what they're reading, they are more likely to read the entire book. We can then focus our attention on how to read a book, how to discuss literature, and how to display learning.
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> *—Alicia Wedgworth, Churchill HS, North East ISD, San Antonio, TX*

Teachers do need, however, to teach students how to make good choices. Suzanne Meads, a middle school teacher we have worked with, facilitates choice by reading aloud snippets of novels. Readers catalogue these snippets in their reader's notebooks, over time building a list of books they might want to read. Students often take up this practice, sharing their own snippets and recommendations with peers and the teacher. For the teacher, assessment is an essential component of a choice-driven curriculum. Counting the number of books started and finished using student-kept reading logs is one assessment tool. Attending to a student's pace through a novel, by using status of the class, is another way to assess if a student is choosing books well-matched to both their interest and their skill level.

Relevance

Relevant reading offers you the opportunity to develop, and reflect on, yourself as a reader. "Young people develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as readers and writers in socially constructed spaces both in and out of school, and these sensed identities permit youth . . . at least a little agency or control over their own identity-making activities" (Alvermann, Jonas, Steele, & Washington, 2006, p. xxiv). With relevant texts that engage them deeply and are a pleasure to read, students grow to understand themselves as readers. They can reflect on the kinds of readers they are and are becoming. When students have a sense of themselves as readers, teachers can then facilitate discussions about the strategy work that happens while reading.

Teachers often see their role as convincing students that canonical literature is relevant, whether Shakespeare, Orwell, or Yeats. Reflecting on that stance, though, is to realize how hard that work of convincing can be. What if, instead, we used our expertise to direct students toward relevant connections to the curriculum within their choice texts (Logan, Lasswell, Hood, & Watson, 2014)? Within the reading strand of the TEKS, topics like vocabulary, inferences, character, genre, and analysis appear again and again. During whole class conversations or reading conferences, we can highlight these topics within students' choice texts. The work of the teacher, then, is to "balance the need for curricular relevance with the social and emotional needs of our students" (Williamson, Mercurio, & Walker, 2013, p. x).

> We are all creatures of narrative, and we're building identity in adolescence—for these reasons alone, students should be reading young adult literature and finding themselves again and again in their literacy lives. This finding is especially true for marginalized youth, who frequently experience erasure on the bookshelf. Young adult literature is where the call for representation is loudest, where the work of equity is happening.
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> *—Jessica Beck, middle school teacher, Houston, Del Valle, Singapore, and New York City*

When teachers support students' choices of relevant texts, the students are selecting books that explore the questions they are wondering about, and then teachers learn from the students what interests and motivates them. So, we begin by working to help students find those texts by reading books, book talking, filling their rooms with books, doing book passes, posting book lists, and having students share with one another a great find. Then teachers build on these shared experiences of finding relevant texts to read by nudging students toward texts that they might not have initially selected.

Talk

Recommending a book to a peer or engaging in an intense book club are examples of reflective, meaning-making work that happen as part of building your identity as a reader and a reading life. Since "reading and writing float on a sea of talk" (Britton, 1970, p.164), readers need time and space to engage in regular conversations about what they are reading and how they are making sense of their reading. Those conversations should take place with the teacher, a partner, and a group of peers because talk changes and grows our thinking (Mercer, 2006).

As teachers, we have so much to tell our students. We want to help them avoid the pitfalls we experienced, and we want them to love the books that we loved. So, we must routinely ask ourselves "Who is doing the talking?" because teacher talk does not help students develop identities as readers. "The language that happens in each person's head is the main set of tools for constructing meaning from texts. Conversations are opportunities to practice using such tools" (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011, p. 13). In conversations with peers and teachers, readers make public the connections they see in the pages of books, employing academic language to talk about their own thinking and reader experience.

> When I introduced *Speak* to the class last month, I announced, a bit dramatically, that it was the first time a book-length work by a woman author had been taught in ninth grade English at our school. Students' talk about Speak reflects more of their experience and interests and opinions, and less of what they think we want to hear. . . . I want to serve our students better by meeting them where they are . . . by opening up the conversation in our classroom to thinking about how we live in the present day.
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> *—Dorothy Meiburg, high school teacher, St. Andrew's Episcopal School, Austin, TX*

As students are reading, teachers should be talking to students about that reading. This talk is one of the main reasons to have students read during work time in class. Teachers can ask open-ended questions like "What surprised you the most?" or "What part of the book was hard and how did you get through that?" These questions get students talking in ways that reveal their engagement with the text and the task of reading. Students responses to these questions allow us to do the necessary work of assessment, particularly formative assessment, of their reading (Serafini, 2010). And we don't even have to have read all the books! Share time, the last few minutes of the class, is another time for talk: about ourselves as readers, our reading process, and the books we love.

Rituals and Routines

As a reader, you have rituals about where you sit, the drink you have, and when you read. Classroom rituals are how a teacher communicates expectations to students and how students learn to guide their attention (Bomer, 2011). As the rest of the Johnston quote from the introduction reminds us: "In a productive classroom, there are routines and rituals that give a sense of stability and control" (p. 29). The power of a routine centered on independent reading time is that

> students are more likely to read outside class as well, because they get interested in their book. The need for reading volume argues against placing independent reading as a once-a-week activity and hoping it will suffice, because that clearly isn't enough to make much of a difference. (Bomer, 2011, p. 81)

While time for reading is a teacher-mandated routine, the way the time is spent is student-directed (Allen, 2000). Given this time, students can enter into a state of reading flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)—where the world fades away and the book becomes the world—not reading to get through the chapter or answer the quiz questions. But because reading is hard, teachers need to hold fast to the ritual of reading time and the routines within it, so that students' can use the time to become readers.

> The biggest routine that I have is that we have to read and write every day. . . . So many times I have students come to me thanking me for the opportunity to sit with a book and listen to their mind. I set timers to set things up and always tell them before they go off and read what materials they'll need. "So, today a good reader would have sticky notes, a pen, and their independent reading book." In August, September, and May, I tell them every single day what they'll need.
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> *—Patty Young, Murchison MS, Austin ISD*

There is no magic trick to making ritual work, and it is hard. We have to be consistent, show commitment to the routine, and be determined to stick to it. When working to establish rituals and routines, we involve the students: They help watch the clock, they serve as models, they share their strategies, and they remind us when we break with our commitment. For teachers and students, there is sanctuary in well-established rituals and routines in an ever-changing and demanding world.

Just Read

> To become a well-rounded, effective reader, my students have to be able to know what they like to read, they have to know how to tackle material that they don't, they have to be able to write about and analyze what they've read, they have to be able to talk about the reading, and they need strategies and structures to support each of these reading moments.
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> *—Gusty Simpson, high school teacher, St. Catherine's Montessori, Houston, TX*

We visit a lot of classrooms. In the classrooms where students are reading all the time, almost all texts of their choosing, students are falling in love with books and reading. Students become readers fighting over characters' decisions and debating issues in the novel. There is a sense of urgency about sharing good books with their classmates, and sometimes they rush through the end of a book just to give it to a friend to read. Students are reflecting deeply on their books, their meaning-making, and their reading lives, which builds and strengthens their identities as readers. The radical stance of the teachers in these classrooms is that their reading instruction does not change with every new email from the state or the principal. These teachers hold tight to a student-centered approach to reading because of their strong belief in these five touchstone: time, choice, relevance, talk, and rituals and routines.

As this article draws to a close, we ask you to reflect on yourself as a reader, your teaching practices, and your students. Consider how these five touchstones can focus your teaching decisions on what is best for the readers in your classroom. How can you create and maintain a space in which students become readers who fall in love with books and reading? Because no matter the test, the curriculum, or the standards, English teachers can create spaces for students to become readers who fall in love with books and reading.

Postscript

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