



Time is devoted to reading workshop in every grade at Nancie Atwell's school, the Center for Teaching and Learning.



Here's a first look at Nancie Atwell's new book, *The Reading Zone*, out this month:

THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

Throw out the test-driven comprehension questions. The way to get kids to read and love it is to let them choose their own books.

By Nancie Atwell

Peek in the door of an American elementary classroom during reading time, or a high school English class at any time, in search of the authentic pleasures of the reading life. What you'll likely find are teachers talking and children listening, making notes, filling in blanks, sitting in groups, writing reports, studying vocabulary—everything but reading a good book.

This leads me to ask: If we can agree that a goal of education is for children to become skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers, why does so much of what goes on in the name of teaching reading prevent kids from experiencing the satisfaction of books?

Every day, smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading.

There it is: the P word. I know, because I've felt it too, that there's a sense of uneasiness among teachers and parents about an approach like a reading workshop. Shouldn't there be some pedagogic strings



PHOTO: TK

attached here? Some paper and pencil and small group activities that look like schoolwork? Because otherwise, isn't reading class, well, too enjoyable?

We need to get over it. When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy and love reading.

WORKSHOP IS WHAT WORKS

Over twenty years of teaching reading in a workshop, my classes of seventh and eighth graders have read an average of at least forty books each year. In the lower grades at our school, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), in Edgecomb, Maine, the numbers are similarly remarkable. This is not because of our population of students—our kids are typical of the rural state in which we live. It's this: The K–6 teachers and I make time every day for our students to curl up with good books and engage in the single activity that consistently correlates with high levels of performance on standardized tests. And that is frequent, voluminous reading. A child sitting in a quiet room with a good book isn't a flashy, or a marketable, teaching method. It just happens to be the only way anyone ever grew up to become a reader.

Along the way, CTL teachers hope our students will become smarter, happier, more just, and more compassionate people because of the worlds they experience within those thousands of black lines of print.

DROP THE ACRONYMS, D.E.A.R.

Reading workshop is not S.S.R. It's not a study hall, where we watch the clock with one eye as we "Drop Everything And Read." Teachers in a reading workshop are teaching readers for a lifetime. In brief lessons we introduce new books and old favorites, tell about authors and genres, read aloud, and talk with kids about their reading rituals and plans. We teach about elements of fiction, how poems work, what efficient readers do—and don't do—when they come across an unfamiliar word, how punctuation gives voice to reading, when to speed up or slow down, who won this year's Newbery Award, how to keep useful reading records, what a sequel is, what readers can glean from a copyright page, how to identify the narrative voice or tone of a novel and why it matters, how there are different purposes for reading that affect a reader's style and pace, how to identify a page-turner, how to tell if a book is too hard, too easy, or just right, and why the only way to become a strong, fluent reader is to read often and a lot. And then, after the lesson, the classroom becomes quiet so that our students may read in companionable silence.



THE READER'S BILL OF RIGHTS

Each year, I let my students in on the "secrets" of reading all passionate readers know—but somehow kids are rarely told. My students added this: The right to free access to lots of books.

The right to skip pages * The right not to finish * The right to reread * The right to browse * The right to read anything * The right not to read something * The right to escapism * The right to read anywhere * The right to read out loud * The right to not defend your tastes

—From Daniel Pennac's *Better Than Life* (1992)

LET THEM IN ON READERS' SECRETS

One of our primary goals as reading teachers is to eliminate—or at least reduce—frustration. We want to make reading easy. In our workshops, teachers start by being honest with kids about what we do as readers. We acknowledge the guilt many of us grew up with—the feeling that there's a proper, rigorous way to read and that somehow we're not doing it right—so we can help our students navigate books with pleasure and confidence. At the beginning of the year, my students and I discuss Daniel Pennac's wonderful list of a reader's rights (see above). I let them know that serious, joyful, engaged, critical readers make choices about how, why, and what they read. In reading workshop, children are encouraged to skim, skip, and look >>

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ahead. Abandoning a book that a reader isn't enjoying is viewed as a smart move, not a character defect. Students learn that the desire to reenter a beloved book isn't cheating; it's a benchmark of someone who is becoming a reader.

WHAT WORKSHOP DOESN'T DO

Consider for a moment the nonsense that passes for reading instruction in our schools by noticing what teaching reading in a workshop is not doing.

First, it's not telling kids they aren't smart or trustworthy enough to choose books and determine which ones are good and right for them. Virginia Woolf said, "Literature is no one's private ground, literature is common ground; let us trespass freely and fearlessly." A reading workshop takes down the "Keep Off the Grass" signs. It invites young readers to explore and enjoy the lushest landscapes on earth, and, through booktalks and conversations, it recommends the worthwhile, scenic routes.

Teachers in a reading workshop help children choose books, develop and refine their literary criteria, and carve out identities for themselves as readers. We get that it's essential for every child we teach to be able to say, "These are my favorite authors, genres, books, and characters this year, and this is why."

Starting in kindergarten and going straight through until the end of high school, free choice of books should be a child's right, not a privilege granted by a kind teacher. Our students have shown us that opportunities to consider, select, and reconsider books make reading attractive to children right from the start. Children will read more books than we ever dreamed possible and books that are more challenging than we ever dreamed of assigning.

NO TESTS, NO ICE CREAM PARTIES

With a reading workshop approach, there aren't any rewards for all this reading. The principal doesn't dye her hair green or host an ice cream party when the student body reads a million words. The delights are intrinsic, always. Students think *This week, I got to experience a whole world with characters I loved* or *Inside me I traveled, wondered, worried, laughed, cried, raged, triumphed*. The passions aroused by stories and characters are the prize.

At the same time, reading workshop doesn't impede the journey or extract a toll. There are no tests, worksheets, book reports, double-entry journals, or discussion questions between the last page of one good book and the first page of the next. Teachers who help kids act as readers learn how to assess their growth in



LEVELING MADE EASY

I like these definitions because they label books, not students. (Thanks to teacher Leslie Funkhouser.)

*** Holiday** Easy first reads or old favorites: a book a student has read many times before or one he or she picks up to take a break from harder books

*** Just Rights** The new books that can help a reader practice and gain experience. They contain a few words per page that the child doesn't know

*** Challenges** Titles that a child would like to read independently but which are too difficult right now (too many unfamiliar words, text that's too dense, etc.)

ways that match what readers do: In a nutshell, they talk with young readers and listen to them.

WHAT WORKSHOP DOES DO

Lastly, notice how reading in a workshop doesn't con tort or clutter the landscape with "reading activities." CTLs reading teachers have learned that the only delivery system for reading comprehension is reading. So there isn't a vocabulary-building exercise, discussion group, bulletin-board display, or metacognitive strategy session in sight. But there are booktalks, read alouds, conversations, time, silence, comfort, simple systems of record-keeping, and a classroom library that gets bigger and better every year, because teachers understand that volume (Continued on page 60)

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of reading and enthusiasm for reading are key and everything else is either a frill or a boondoggle.

ONE MORNING IN MAINE

If you were to visit my classroom in Edgecomb, Maine, this is what you might see: seventh and eighth graders sprawled on beanbag chairs—decked out in the current uniform of American adolescence: jeans ripped at the knees, logo T-shirts, hoodies. I'll be scooting among them whispering a conversation to each: "How is it?" or "What do you think so far?" or "What's happening now?" and, always, "What page are you on?" Then I'm back in my rocking chair. Except for the turning of pages, the room is still.

If you saw my students on any other occasion in their waking lives—say, at recess as they shoot hoops, exchange iPods, tease, and scream—it would be hard to reconcile that noise with this

quiet. But here, in our reading workshop, it's dead silent because my kids are gone. Each boy and girl has vanished into an invisible world. Each, as they put it, is lost in the reading zone.

GETTING IN THE ZONE

A seventh grader, Jed, coined the phrase "reading in the zone." It was his interpretation of the condition writer Thomas Newkirk characterized as "the reading state." I shared an article by Newkirk with my class, and when Jed said it was more of a zone than a state, the phrase stuck. The reading zone is the place where readers go when they leave our classroom behind and live vicariously in their books.

I asked my students to describe what reading feels like when they're in the zone. Tyler wrote, "It's hard to explain. It's like you're in the book, like right next to the main character, but you're thinking his thoughts."

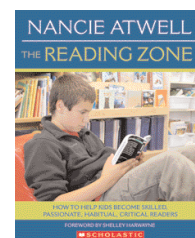
Another student, Audrey, noted, "First, I have to be in a great book. Otherwise I don't want to enter it. But once I do, I don't always become the main character. Sometimes I become a best friend of the main character, someone who doesn't talk but just listens to his or her problems and joys. I feel as if the character needs me there, so I don't want to leave the novel."

Finally, I asked my students to describe the school conditions that made this level of absorption possible. Forrest, a seventh grader wrote that to enter the reading zone, he needs:

- Encouragement and advice from the teacher.
- Time to read at school.
- Trillions of great books as backups.
- Absolute silence, to help be transported into "The World."
- Booktalks to recommend great books.
- Comfortable cushions and pillows.
- A healthy chunk of time (30 minutes) to read at home every night.

In other words, what he needs is reading workshop. My students like the solitude of the reading zone. They know how to be happily alone with a book. They also understand that sometimes they need the experiences of other readers to keep themselves going. This is the rightful busywork of a reading class and a reading teacher. The ultimate delivery system for impelled reading is a deliberate environment that invites, nurtures, and sustains immersion in stories and characters, that says every day of every school year, *Welcome to the zone.* □

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A teacher since 1973, Nancie Atwell is the founder of the Center for Teaching and Learning in Edgecomb, Maine. This article was adapted from her

newest book, *The Reading Zone: How to Help Kids Become Skilled, Passionate, Habitual, Critical Readers.* To order, call 1-800-SCHOLASTIC.