

Building a Reading Culture

Feature

by Judi Paradis, February 2018

The tension is real in libraries. We love books. We love to read. We want all our kids to read. Yet we also have to focus on information literacy, closing the technology gap, collaborating on project-based learning, and more. Despite this, many of us repeatedly return to our love of books. So it is no wonder that I was thrilled when teachers at my elementary school discovered Donalyn Miller's *The Book Whisperer* and started talking about the idea of developing a reading culture in our building.

I knew this could matter for our students. Avid readers are fluent readers; their vocabularies are robust; they write well; they build background knowledge as their range expands (Krashen 2004; Guthrie 2008). Some argue that they can even be more empathetic than their non-reading peers (Mohe, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris 2008). The challenge for us was how to build our reading culture. Time and curricular demands were working against it. Teachers often felt the need to jettison reading aloud or would swap out independent reading time for an academic activity. Perhaps, we thought, we could be a bit subversive and just do it...and so we set out to do just that.

Getting Buy-in

The library can play an important role in building a reading culture, but a true cultural shift requires a coordinated effort. Our fifth grade teachers were invested in the idea, and we asked the reading teachers and fourth grade teachers to join us, as well as a special education teacher, an English language learner teacher, and our challenge program teacher. It was uplifting to see that each one of these teachers understood the rationale for promoting and supporting independent student reading. Once we had a team in place, I approached our principal and told her that we were interested in getting kids avidly reading. I asked her to fund the purchase of Donalyn Miller's book *Reading in the Wild*, which provides practical strategies for building the reading culture. Our principal agreed and I placed an order for fifteen copies.

Olga Nesi has written about the need for great care in building a reading culture (2012). In our case, we knew that we needed to talk about how to implement Miller's ideas and adapt them for our school. As in many schools, finding time to talk was difficult, so I proposed an evening discussion on Google Hangouts. This was a new idea for our staff, but there was enthusiasm, and eight to ten teachers met online during the fall to discuss chapters as we read them. We began to develop a vocabulary to discuss the habits of readers, and we began to imagine support and activities that could be woven into the school day to encourage students to read more and to read more widely. I was pleased to know that we were all together in this, and during library visits I began using the same terms I knew other teachers were using to talk about reading. We were "wild readers" who eagerly talked about books and knew what we would like to read next. We challenged our students to each read forty books over the course of the school year.

Supporting the Teachers

The teachers were clear on how they could promote reading in their classes with read alouds, access to books, enthusiastic sharing, and celebrations as reading goals were achieved. I thought about how I could provide support through the library. I was surprised to learn that teachers grappled to keep up with appropriate literature for their students, and I decided that providing great books was an important way to be involved. As I embarked on my own forty book challenge, I began enthusiastically sharing the new books I sought out with teachers and students. Our literacy coach gave each teacher a special poster for their classroom doors so all of the teachers in our building could advertise what they were reading. Seeing the visual evidence that we were all readers was inspiring. I especially enjoyed going by the assistant principal's office, as his young daughters were great fans of books such as *Fancy Nancy* and *Ballet Cat*, and he proudly posted these titles each week.

I encouraged teachers to read well-reviewed new books to their classes. As teachers read books such as *The Crossover*, *The War that Saved My Life*, *Wonder*, *Out of My Mind* or *Wolf Hollow* with students, the shared discovery of a great book and the ensuing discussion it provoked began building real enthusiasm. Suddenly, kids who only read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* were coming into the library asking for books like the ones they listened to in class. As teachers discovered excellent new middle-grade books, their enthusiasm for the project grew too. Some books became so popular that I had to keep adding copies to my collection. The library has several small book carts, and many of the participating classrooms asked me to provide a cart with books to supplement their classroom libraries.

My enthusiasm for sharing books in my own school led me to start a district-wide digital book bulletin to share favorite books selected and reviewed by members of our department. It struck me that even the librarians sometimes forgot that we really are our district's literature experts and sharing what we know is valuable. We continue to produce and distribute this *Book Buzz* every few months to share with our teaching colleagues. Within my own building, I began sharing my reading life more overtly. I set up an account on Goodreads to keep track of the books I read with students in mind. I am disciplined about updating this regularly and have my reviews pushed out onto our school Facebook page. I also share my book lists and reviews through my own school website, and I share them weekly with teachers and students who have "friended" me on our library software (Follett's Destiny Quest). I also began including the book I'm currently reading as part of my signature on any emails sent to the staff. I

know that many elementary teachers love Pinterest. Consequently, I set up Pinterest boards with suggested read alouds for grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 and linked them to my email signature.

Supporting the Students

Knowing what to read matters, but that alone does not help sustain students challenged to read forty books. I booktalked anything new that came in and set aside new books for the fifth grade students. They loved knowing that being the oldest students in our school provided this advantage. Like their teachers, some students discovered a world of books they had not explored and some emerged as reading leaders. I sought these students out to help them build a list of "books to read," knowing they would promote them with their peers. One student hooked his buddies on Harry Potter and then, with some guidance from me, got them all deeply enmeshed in the King Arthur stories.

Students were allowed free range in the library. They knew they could come into the library at any point when they needed books, and the fourth and fifth graders were allowed to help themselves and check out their own books. Almost all students took this privilege seriously and it was not uncommon to have five to ten kids quietly exploring the stacks during their recess. In fact, this worked so well, I purchased another scanner and set up a self-checkout station in the back of the library.

I also showed students how to open individual accounts on the library catalog site. Students discovered they could keep track of the number of books they read, collect a list of titles, and even recommend books to other kids. One of our cultural shifts emphasized thinking about what you want to read next. I showed the students how they could create a list connected to our catalog and check before coming down to see if a book was in.

Once a month, I opened the library to "genre lunches." Each month twelve to twenty students would sign up to come discuss books in a certain genre. This was easier to manage than a standard book discussion group that required all students to read the same novel, and it provided students with a chance to bring favorite books and hear about others from like-minded friends. I was especially impressed that occasionally a student who didn't read the genre but wanted to learn about it would attend. I would bring a set of questions to guide discussion and loved how passionate kids—and sometimes visiting teachers—would get. For example, when our fantasy readers gathered, I told them to come prepared to talk about:

- Is it fantasy if it just has a talking animal, or do you need to have a completely different world for it to be any good?
- Do you like your fantasy to be more like historical fiction (*Eragon*) or more like realistic fiction (Harry Potter, Rick Riordan)?
- Why is fantasy the genre that always has huge series? Is there a single book that is a good fantasy and doesn't need a sequel?

I also encouraged students to participate in our state book award program. We have participated in this project for many years, and it provided yet another way to engage students in reading. This year, several librarians in our district wanted to start our own citywide book award. We expanded lists and emphasized high-quality texts. I included several of the books shared widely by our first reading cohort and this new award program has been quickly embraced by our students and teachers. We reached out to the public library, and they agreed to promote this with us.

Successes and Challenges

As spring approached, we were delighted to see the majority of our fifth graders reach the forty-book mark, and almost every student greatly exceeded the amount read in previous years. My circulation was high (over 33,000 books checked out in a school of 450 students) and I noticed a qualitative improvement in the types of books students were checking out and reading. I also found students were much more likely to engage in discussions about the books they were reading. We held a reading celebration at the end of the school year and offered students a choice of activities related to their reading. These ranged from book tastings to creating new book covers in the computer lab. In the library, students watched trailers for some of their favorite books and talked about what actors they would cast if they were making a movie from a book they'd loved this year. It was fun, lively, and showed their real knowledge of book characters.

For the new school year, we hope to build on our successes. Time remains a challenge. District academic requirements must be met, and we work hard to stake out time for independent reading and sharing books. Making time to talk to teachers about great books, to book talk to classes, and to celebrate reading successes needs to be a library priority. There are still students who are not completely convinced about the power of a good book, but we are seeing improvement. I've completely reorganized the library to ensure that older readers have their own reading spaces, their own checkout station, and a place to display and share great books. I am meeting regularly with our literacy coach, and, as we think about reading culture in our building weekly, I think we're on the right path.

Works Cited

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Resources:

Our first issue of *Book Buzz*: <https://app.flashissue.com/newsletters/bb458cd87fa2a690a9d6db77d44314899418e231>

Goodreads list: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/2990575-judi-paradis?shelf=read>

Pinterest boards

K-1: <https://www.pinterest.com/judiparadis/read-alouds-k-1/>

2-3: <https://www.pinterest.com/judiparadis/read-alouds-grades-2-and-3/>

4-5: <https://www.pinterest.com/judiparadis/read-alouds-grades-4-and-5/>

MLA CITATION

Paradis, Judi. "Building a Reading Culture." *School Library Connection*, February 2018, schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2137087.

<https://schoollibraryconnection.com/Content/Article/2137087?topicCenterId=2252403>

Entry ID: 2137087