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Professional Books of Interest

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Professional Books of Interest

EDITED BY MARY JO FINNEY
AND PAT DANIELS GALLANT

Dear Readers,

It's become a game for us. As we prepare each column we hunt for a common theme across the reviews. This time we struggled to identify just one. Are all of these texts teaching us something about moving beyond the surface? Are they showing us how to think more deeply? Or maybe they are about *slowing down* to revise our thinking, which may eventually lead us to action? We decided that, in many ways, these themes are also linked. Each of the books invites us to think and question.

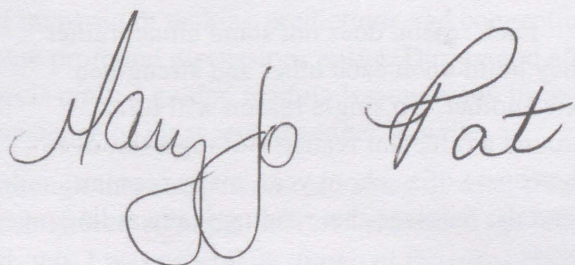
Dawn Summerlee, a high school English teacher, read *Reading Reasons* (Gallagher, 2003) to find ways to help teens discover their own reasons for reading. Read the author's top 10 reasons, discover your own, and share them with your students. If they can identify their own reasons, you may avoid that mid-year dry spell and develop motivated readers.

Sara Aijazuddin, a new first-grade teacher, acknowledges in her review of *Teaching for Comprehension In Reading Grades K-2* (Pinnell, & Scharer, 2003) that the book caused her to revisit what she already knew about comprehension strategies for young children. The book provided further inspiration to take her next professional steps forward.

Pat connects her own schooling, her first years as a teacher, and the book *Critical Literacy* (McLaughlin, & DeVoogd, 2004). She not only points to the importance of teaching students to think more deeply about what they read, but she underscores that teachers should read everything with a critical eye—including this book.

Finally, *Choice Words* (Johnston, 2004) made a strong impression on Mary Jo in its concise but deep exploration of the power of teacher language on creating students' identities as learners. The book asks teachers to slow down and think about the significance of every word they utter in the classroom and its potential influence on a student's self-perception.

Don't take our word alone! Read these books. What themes link them for you?

Handwritten signatures of Mary Jo and Pat in cursive script.

Gallagher, K. (2003). *Reading Reasons: Motivational Mini-Lessons for Middle and High School*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers. ISBN: 1-57110-356-2; \$21.00

BY DAWN SUMMERLEE

As another school year begins, many of my students and I radiate hope and energy. Colorful bulletin boards, shiny notebook covers, sharpened pencils ... and then ... a few months later ... the February Funk—a time when teachers and students grow weary. Sometime after winter holiday, you, too, may find that you are hitting that snooze button more frequently. It's been a month since you've changed your bulletin board and student notebooks are covered with stickers and doodles.

Maintaining motivation is important to everyone. For the past several years, increasing motivation has been one of my teaching goals. So, while surfing through the thick 2004 MRA conference catalogue, I noticed and highlighted sessions on getting teens to read—and getting them to *like* it. In one inspirational session, California teacher and curriculum specialist Kelly Gallagher related his struggles and successes motivating adolescents. When he mentioned writing this book, *Reading Reasons*, I knew I needed to read it.

The book begins with startling observations of the power of reading education on our youth's futures: Supposedly, one California governor looked at fourth-grade reading scores to determine the amount of prison space the state would need in 10 years—soon after those children graduated high school. Gallagher briefly discusses his top ten reading reasons:

1. Reading is rewarding.
2. Reading builds a mature vocabulary.
3. Reading makes you a better writer.
4. Reading is hard and “hard” is necessary.
5. Reading makes you smarter.
6. Reading prepares you for the world of work.
7. Reading well is financially rewarding.
8. Reading opens the door to college and beyond.
9. Reading arms you against oppression.
10. Reading develops your moral compass.

From page one, Gallagher clarifies and supports these reasons by referring to studies, using unique analogies, and sharing stories about his experiences.

The impetus for creating his 10 reading reasons stemmed from one student, Richard, who told his teacher that “reading is boring and pointless” (p. 1). Each of us has encountered a Richard. I want my reluctant readers to experience more of what books offer. After reading Gallagher's text, I understand that we need to *show* kids the values of reading—not values that are handed down to them, but the nitty-gritty. Every teenager wants to know, “What's in it for me?” This question must be handled carefully.

Mixing theory and practice, Gallagher elaborates on his MRA presentation by offering mini-lessons for *any* classroom and probing the question, “Why should we read?” I hear this same question from my sophomores and juniors. It's a disheartening question that I have found nearly impossible to answer. Gallagher makes a solid case for sharing the reasons people read, why the teacher himself reads, why the students should read, too. His answers range from the practical to the thought-provoking. Even while he writes, the author comes up with new reasons and invites all readers to do the same.

Gallagher might argue that, every so often, students need a motivational booster shot. He stresses the value of instilling intrinsic, rather than extrinsic, motivation. The free slice of pizza that the local reading program hands out will neither challenge nor truly develop a child as a reader. The book's 5- to 20-minute mini-lessons and handy appendix offer several ideas. Most important is to understand that,

Each reason does not stand alone; rather they build upon each other and strengthen one another. No single reason will turn around a reluctant reader. But together, over the course of a school year, many reasons send the message that reading is rewarding. (p. 4)

Reading Reasons is quick and easy-to-follow and may help the new teacher—budding with idealism—perceive and cope with the realities of today's teenagers.

At the same time, Gallagher's book may reinvigorate the veteran teacher who has regressed into the daily worksheet routine. Not only does the author outline how he structures his classroom library and reading program, he reminds us to show students that we read. Sometimes children "don't understand that reading is power, and that by becoming proficient self-motivated readers, they arm themselves against injustice and

hegemony" (p. 16). By sharing our personal reasons, Kelly Gallagher believes, we help young people take the first step toward becoming literate adults.

Don't wait until February to discover that there's little energy left for reading. By that time it might be like squeezing a dry sponge. Instead, begin cultivating, *and reiterating*, the honest-to-goodness reasons for reading that make sense to today's teen.

Pinnell, G.S., & Scharer, P.L. (2003). *Teaching for Comprehension in Reading, Grades K-2: Strategies for Helping Children Read with Ease, Confidence, and Understanding*. New York: Scholastic. ISBN 0-439-54258-8; \$27.99

BY SARA AIJAZUDDIN

Gay Su Pinnell and Patricia Scharer's book is replete with ideas for making the most out of guided reading lessons for primary grade students. Within it, I found familiar ideas about supporting comprehension during interactive read-alouds, shared reading, and independent reading components of a program. The authors emphasize that reading involves active engagement before, during, and after processing a text. They highlight the importance of thoughtful selection, introduction, reading, revisiting, and discussion. They also provide insights for teaching processing strategies for word study and comprehension through purposeful modeling during guided reading.

Pinnell and Scharer reminded me that, in order to have an impact on children's literacy, teachers must demonstrate the importance of books to children every day, using texts that are engaging and interesting. I agree. When I read with passion, my first graders inch closer and closer to me, savoring every minute. Because of our interactions with the text, the children get involved in making predictions and connections. Some profound discussions ensue. During and after a well-crafted guided reading lesson, many have an abundance of ideas and are eager to write.

Although this book reinforced some of what I had recently learned at the university, I found new material, too. I was especially drawn to the ideas about management and collaborating with colleagues. As a first-year teacher, these were excellent next steps for me. Because I am interested in learning more about managing instruction, I was pleased to read about

Managed Independent Learning (MIL). MIL is the time in which children work independently while the teacher leads small groups of students through guided reading lessons. To illustrate MIL, Pinnell and Scharer take us into Leslie Evans's second-grade classroom where Ms. Evans explains how she implements centers. By sharing her experiences, this teacher deals credibly with issues that arise when teaching her students to work independently during guided reading time:

- establishing routines;
- deciding on the purpose and content of literacy activities;
- making independent work activities more powerful;
- developing self-regulating behavior in students; and
- teaching the students to manage their own learning.

Ms. Evans set up ongoing activity centers, rather than daily or weekly ones, so that she seldom needed to provide lengthy explanations of procedures as she modified them. After reading this section of the book, I became ruthless about cutting down the time for low-priority items.

Pinnell and Scharer suggest that teachers give high priority to creating time for conferring with col-

leagues. Regular conversations help teachers build their knowledge base while providing opportunities to exchange ideas. They suggest that teachers meet often to discuss the transitions students make between grades and to confer about students' reading capabilities and their writing, and to share other work

samples so appropriate instruction takes place. These conversations support implementation of the book's instructional ideas while developing helpful, collaborative, and professional relationships. I personally find Pinnell and Scharer's book most worthwhile and promising as I begin a new school year.

McLaughlin, M. & DeVoogd, G. (2004). *Critical Literacy: Enhancing students' Comprehension of Text*. New York: Scholastic. ISBN: 0-439-62804-0 \$17.99

BY PATRICIA DANIELS GALLANT

Like the authors of this book, I attended elementary school during an era of "literal level education" (p. 20). Unquestioningly, I viewed my teachers and the texts I read as the absolute source of truthful information. I seldom paused to consider how my own ideas or experiences related to what I was reading. My job was to absorb and be able to repeat as much of their information as possible. I answered explicit questions about what I read and I wrote reams of book reports, but I seldom *discussed* a text.

When I became a teacher, I tried new approaches. My fourth-grade students critically discussed, engaged, analyzed, and interpreted text, instead of simply summarizing the plots or ideas. I learned that, if I really wanted to take students inside books, my best discussion questions were the types I would use with my adult friends: What did you think of the writing? What was the author trying to do? Why? When they knew their opinions mattered, their responses were most insightful.

In today's classrooms, teaching students to question what they read—before, during, and after reading—has become a focus of comprehension strategy instruction at all grade levels. In *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*, however, Maureen McLaughlin and Glenn DeVoogd elevate the concept of taking a critical stance to something more complex. They define critical literacy as "a dynamic process that examines power relationships, acknowledges that all texts are biased, and encourages readers to explore alternative perspectives and take action. It expands our thinking and enlightens our perceptions as we read both the word and the world from a critical stance" (p. 33).

In Part One, the authors describe the theoretical base for critical literacy. They cite the work of critical theorist Paulo Freire, who asked unsettling questions about the social and political implications of teachers' decisions. Likewise, a critical literacy approach asks teachers to be mindful that our decisions about instructional materials and strategies influence how our students perceive the world. Each text is created and situated within a particular social and ideological context. It is our responsibility to guide students to question what world views a text advances, and whether these views are acceptable. For example, students may consider asking *Who is advantaged by this text? Who is disadvantaged or marginalized?* By thinking more deeply about the text, they subsequently may revise their worldviews and decide to take action.

In Part Two, the book moves into classroom applications. The authors provide practical ideas and lessons for teaching and supporting critical literacy and for selecting appropriate texts. They describe how to incorporate several instructional strategies into a guided comprehension instructional framework. Teachers' voices and students' work enhance creative and engaging lessons across the grades. These lessons develop three themes: Challenging the Text, Exploring Identities, and Seeing Beyond the Bias. In addition to discussions, they suggest activities that use written responses, sketches, dramatizations, and song lyrics. The appendixes provide a useful annotated bibliography of fiction and informational trade book titles and Web sites to use when teaching critical literacy.

As I read the lessons, I occasionally questioned parts of them. (After all, I was in a "critical" mindset.) For

example, one teacher asked second graders to consider who the real hero in "Jack and the Beanstalk" might be. She wanted her young students to understand that main characters sometimes do bad things (p. 98). She reported that her students had cheered Jack as a hero for killing the giant after first reading the book, but none of them considered Jack a hero after the guided discussion. Her students concluded that Jack was "not nice" and a "bad guy" because he stole the harp, hen, and gold and then

killed the giant. I think that her goal is appropriate, but I might select a different text to make this point. I question whether this discussion might taint a revered traditional fairy tale for some young children.

If you are looking for a good book for a teacher study group or other professional development at your school this year, I recommend this one. McLaughlin and DeVoogd do an excellent job of making the practice of critical literacy accessible.

Johnston, P. H. (2004). *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse. ISBN 1-57110-389-9 \$11.00

BY MARY JO FINNEY

Get your highlighter ready for this one! *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* is so filled with wisdom, practicality, inspiration, and hope, you may want to highlight almost every word. So intriguing is this book, I found myself highlighting, then flipping directly to the eight pages of references, then back again. *Where did these ideas come from? Where can I read more?*

In less than 100 pages, Peter H. Johnston suggests compelling ideas—a catalogue really—of phrases, questions, and words teachers could use that just might transform children's learning. This is not language crafted to impress a listener, but everyday words that have the power to shape a child's identity, help learners become strategic, and teach for transfer and knowledge.

The organization of this book reflects its content: "The Language of Influence in Teaching," "Noticing and Naming," "Identity," "Agency and Becoming Strategic," "Flexibility and Transfer (or Generalizing)," "Knowing," "An Evolutionary, Democratic Learning Community," and "Who Do You Think You're Talking To?" Important appendixes follow these eight chapters, including case studies of four fourth graders, an analysis of a teacher-class-student interaction, and a word about the limitations of the book. I particularly appreciated the appendix titled "The Fine Print." It is there that Johnston reminds us that, although his book focuses on careful consideration of every word we use as teachers, communication goes well beyond words. Had I not read

this appendix before reading the entire book, I would have questioned the book's simplicity.

The author explains the intent and wording of nearly 100 specific questions and phrases—featured in bold print throughout the chapters—and their specific instructional purposes. Some goals he discusses are: fostering deep thinking in students, allowing students to adopt multiple perspectives, and communicating that writing is naturally wrought with problems. The use of "we" and its effect on students along with the role of silence in fostering learning is included.

Johnston underscores the importance of thinking about what we say and how we say it. He reminds us of the power of language then explains how and why language holds power. Woven throughout this text are direct references to language's potential to affect—not only the individual learner but also the classroom and, eventually, society. Johnston's view of how to achieve a democratic society is not hidden between the lines. His classroom-based research of teachers' interactions with both struggling and proficient young readers inspired *Choice Words*.

This book may catch you by surprise. How so few words might make a big difference is the fascination of language, and Johnston underscores this so effectively in his text. Right or wrong, language is the fundamental material every teacher relies upon to do the work of teaching.

On second thought, skip the highlighter. Every idea in this book is worth remembering.