

## Colleagues

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# Images of Literacy

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Old Mother Hubbard

# Images of Literacy

By Mary Shelton, GVSU Faculty

Illustrations from Reading and Literature First Reader (1911), Published by Row, Peterson & Company; Chicago

*In my second classroom many years ago, near the end of the day, students arrived from their gym class tired and sweaty and began to search for bags filled with Easter goodies. As students ate treats from the bags filled with plastic eggs they became... a little silly. Some sat on the eggs, cackled, and pretended to lay them. Others devised a way to thread grass through pencil toppers. Among the chaos of the egg-laying laughter and the swinging pencil toppers, there sat one boy with his fingers on his bottom lip as he read Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.*

*Summer approached and the tables and chairs lined the halls, empty classrooms were being cleaned, and kids solemnly attended summer school. A young boy read a short text to his teacher. When the teacher told him the number of words he read in one minute, he hung his head and said, "That's less than I read the first time."*

**T**he first scenario demonstrates choice, motivation, and engagement, while the second reduces reading to the number of words a student can read in a minute. The first student chooses to read when it is not required. How likely is the second student to do that? I remember from

the days of completing my master's degree at Michigan State University (MSU), Steven Tchudi, longtime editor of English Journal and past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), told us that students should experience the joy of language in our classrooms. Teachers create environments where students can experience that joy, where students not only enjoy reading and writing, but leave those classrooms on their way to becoming lifelong readers and writers. In a time when we hear weekly, if not daily, reports of how schools are failing our students when it comes to literacy, perhaps it is time to recall some of the best practices for nurturing readers and writers.

## Effective Literacy Practices

In the article entitled *Every Child Every Day*, Allington, former president of IRA and widely published educator, discusses several elements of effective literacy instruction, and while it may not have been his intent, these strategies also serve to help students experience that joy of language or joyful literacy. Allington emphasizes the need for students to experience certain activities and strategies daily. One strategy, teacher read-alouds, benefit students by developing a sense of story, providing an enriched vocabulary, and improving comprehension and fluency (Allington, 2012). As any elementary school teacher will tell you, the most popular book in the classroom is the one he/she just read orally among their classmates. As teachers read the picture books of Polacco, Van Allsburg, Bunting, the poetry of Silverstein, Prelutsky, the intermediate novels of White, Curtis, Giff, and the informational texts of Lauber, Simon, Gibbons, they are filling their classrooms with the joy of language—for every child on every day.

Once the students are motivated to read and have structured times for independent reading, the next element for developing literacy is providing students with necessity of choice. According to Allington, providing choice improves

comprehension and motivation to read. Given text choice and an independent reading time, students engage in reading for their own pleasure. Students have the option to read picture books, poetry, informational texts, magazines and student-written texts. In my classroom, once everyone had their reading materials, the room was quiet, filled with engaged readers. Watching them make use of independent reading was one of my favorite times of the day—despite how hectic the first few minutes were. I remember how students often tried to locate specific materials at the beginning of our independent reading times. An incident that really stands out in my memory is the day that I heard

*“Go home now, said the fish. You will find your wife in her hut. The fisherman went home, and there sat his wife in the little hut. And there they live to this very day.”*

— German Folk Tale

two boys arguing. When I asked what was going on Jason said that Andy had all the Little Critter books in his desk and was charging other students with tickets to check them out! Arguments over books—as a teacher I loved it! Every student deserves to choose their own reading materials every day.

*One day on the playground, I did a double-take when I saw Melissa twirling a jump-rope with one hand and holding the book she was reading in another, or Nick and a full set of encyclopedias. He brought them to school, requiring the help of two students to get them into our classroom. You could hardly see the boys behind the monstrous stacks of books. As he and the others set the books on a table, other students gathered ‘round. “Do you guys know about encyclopedias? Did you ever hear of atoms? That’s all in here,” he told them pointing to the A volume. To a classroom of avid readers, what he brought was nothing less than a treasure.*

Turning his attention towards effective writing instruction, Allington states that students should write daily about something personally meaningful. He laments that in his travels across the country writing in classrooms is so often reduced to short responses to what is read, writing to teacher-selected prompts, or writing with strict formulas that “turn even paragraphs and essays into fill-in-the-blank

exercises” (Allington, 2012). During my daughter’s schooling I have seen all of these examples repeated each year. Early on she was given the writing prompt: write about what you like about snow. When I asked my daughter what she wrote, since she hated snow, she said that she just made stuff up. Prompts like this turn writing into a task that is not meaningful. Over the years, the paragraphs and essays that turn into “fill-in-the blank exercises” have become the status quo.

But it can be different. In classrooms where students have some choice over what they write and where some of their writing is published, students tend to write what is personally meaningful. Once when our writing time was cancelled because of an assembly, one of my students said, “Hey, don’t take away my writing time!” Some

students even told their moms not to schedule appointments during this time. Trying to understand her son’s excitement, one mom stopped to ask what we did during writing time. She was surprised that my answer was simply, “We write and share our writing.” The mom’s face seemed to say, “That’s it?” And I explained that when the writing was personally meaningful, and students were allowed to actually compose, instead of filling in forms, they really enjoyed the work. We also take time in the classroom where students can share their writings with each other when we published a book or class collection.



The Fisherman and His Wife

In addition to these published forms, we also wrote to pen pals. Usually we wrote to another second or third grade class, but during Desert Storm we also wrote to soldiers. We began writing to only four soldiers, but by the time we were done, we were writing to over thirty. Many students wrote to two or more soldiers. Students not only found this personally meaningful, but we had a classroom visit from one of the soldiers on leave, and we heard from many

other soldiers and their wives about how meaningful the letters were to them. Students simply need to write what is personally meaningful every day.

Eventually these writing practices went beyond the classroom and students found themselves writing in their personal time. One day Luke asked if scrap paper could be used to write stories. We had been reading

fractured fairy tales, and in only a few minutes he returned with one:

*Once there was a witch who made brooms. Her mom and dad thought making brooms was her job, her life, her destiny. Okay, cut that out! One day she was making brooms but she had an evil plan up her sleeve. She took out some magic dust. Put it on the broom and POOF! She was gone. The End*

Students often brought in stories and poems written at home as well. One of my favorites was an illustrated poem that read: I am a flower with rainbows all around me. We



can observe that students find literacy meaningful when they choose to read and write during times when they could be doing anything else.

Adding to the effective literacy spectrum, Allington emphasizes class discussions. He cites multiple studies and research that illuminate the benefits of daily talk about books, including improved comprehension, engagement, and improved

standardized test scores (Allington, 2012). This talk is usually informal, with one student telling another about what they are reading and what it means to them. Times for daily sharing were structured into our classroom reading and writing times. While often students shared with partners, writers had one specific day that they could share with the whole class. Students loved the author's chair experience, of reading their writing to their

classmates and receiving feedback. Every morning as students came into class they checked the special schedule (gym, art, music, recess) and then the writing-sharing schedule. A student might say, "All right, it's a gym day and my group gets to share!"

Sometimes field trips were arranged near the end of the year. Once when we hosted our pen pals from the other classes, we had a picnic and some organized games, and then returned to our classroom. I told my students to find a spot where they could talk with their pen pal. Somewhat surprised, yet mostly proud, I watched as one girl showed her pen pal the books she published. Another showed his pen pal our class publications. It was literacy in motion.

## Final Thoughts

During summer 2015 I heard Donalyn Miller, author of *The Book Whisperer and Reading in the Wild*, speak about engaging readers with books. She spoke for over an hour describing some of the best books of 2015. After her presentation I thanked her for the huge contribution she was making to the field. She said, "You know, I have to do

this. Our kids don't have that much time to begin to engage in books. We need to hook them with good books now."

It's true; we don't have much time. We know how to create readers and writers, but unfortunately we often engage in practices that will turn students away from reading and writing. I think back to that little boy, sad and dejected because he could not read enough words per minute. I think about the students in classrooms across

our state and nation who write endlessly to prompts and formulated essays. I think of the countless practices which result in student avoidance of any literate activity. Teaching literacy can be so much more than that. By using effective strategies we can create classrooms where students not only learn to read and write, but classrooms where every child, every day, experiences joyful literacy.



Old Woman in a Basket

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