

TODAY'S YOUTH'S VOICE ON HOW THEY VIEW READING AND WHAT "COUNTS"

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Encouraging Reading or Forcing It?

With the changes in school library spaces and school librarians' roles, there has never been a more extraordinary time to be a librarian. However, one thing will never change even in these dynamic times; we are still the driving force behind strong reading programs and fostering that love of reading. We collaborate with teachers to embed reading and literacy into every content area, whether it is digital literacy or effectively using our print collection. We are the only educators on campus who are teachers to every student and every faculty member. How we wield this influence can greatly determine the outcome of the reading programs and culture as evidenced not only by the performance of our students on standardized tests but also by the lasting effects of reading for enjoyment and understanding.

Unfortunately, we have also seen the effects of "pushing reading" on kids. Students' perception that we are "forcing kids to read" can sometimes negate any positive outcomes reading incentives were meant to have. To find out just what students think of reading, reading programs, and reading incentives, I sat with a group of students who had started up a library council at their local high school. To get a broader range of perspectives, I also invited siblings to come. These kids obviously love reading, but they also have strong opinions about how what they read is perceived. When fourth-grader Karmen (all names are pseudonyms) was asked about having to keep a reading log, she stated:

I feel that incentives do not motivate me because I feel like filling out forms with how many minutes, hours, and seconds I read is just a waste of time. I could definitely read 2,500

pages in a year, but I would much rather enjoy the book. It could have been better if we didn't have to say the exact time and pages I read.

Emma, a senior and member of her high school Book Battle team, said:

My teachers made sure we read a certain amount each week, and the incentive was the grade we would get for it. I read all the time but never filled out my chart so I got bad grades for reading, so I didn't really like that. Teachers should just ask students what they're reading and engage them, rather than having them write down how many minutes they spent reading.

Are Challenges the Answer?

The question is, how do we create a culture of readers without driving them away? We want them reading; we want them doing the reading challenges for pleasure if so inclined, and we want them to enjoy the experience. How do we bring them into the fold of avid readers and keep them there? It is so hard to express the passion we have for reading without coming across as forcing our beliefs on students. Ideally, we want to let them come to the realization of reading's benefits on their own. Accelerated Reading quizzes, class novels, and traditional reading logs are not working. In a recent study, nineteen third-grade higher-performing literacy students were observed to measure the effect of incentives on the AR program. According to the researcher, "Baseline was student AR performance during the first four weeks of school; the incentives (prizes) were given the next four weeks. Findings indicated that students' attitudes became worse over the entire length of the study. Prizes included certificates, food, books, pencils, bookmarks, or anything that

might be attractive to the recipient. The conclusion was that the reading incentives were counterproductive even though the number of books read and the scores on the test remained the same" (Stanfield 2008, 99).

Reading challenges are considerably more effective when the kids have a choice in what counts as reading. This generation has literally millions of things vying for their attention, and we cannot compete unless we offer what they want to learn, read, or explore. Isn't this the original idea behind having libraries? Our purpose is nothing new—but our approach must be. Here is where we get to be that dynamic librarian mentioned earlier.

So how do we create a reading culture? In the past it has been by creating reading programs based on how many books are read, or how many pages, or how many words or genres, etc. We think this is giving kids choice, but as I found when talking to students, these challenges are not working if the goal is to create lovers of reading. Nena, senior and library council leader for her high school, claimed:

If a kid is forced to read a genre they don't like for class to get a grade, they might not enjoy it, but if it's for extra credit then kids might try to diversify what they read and actually try to read more.

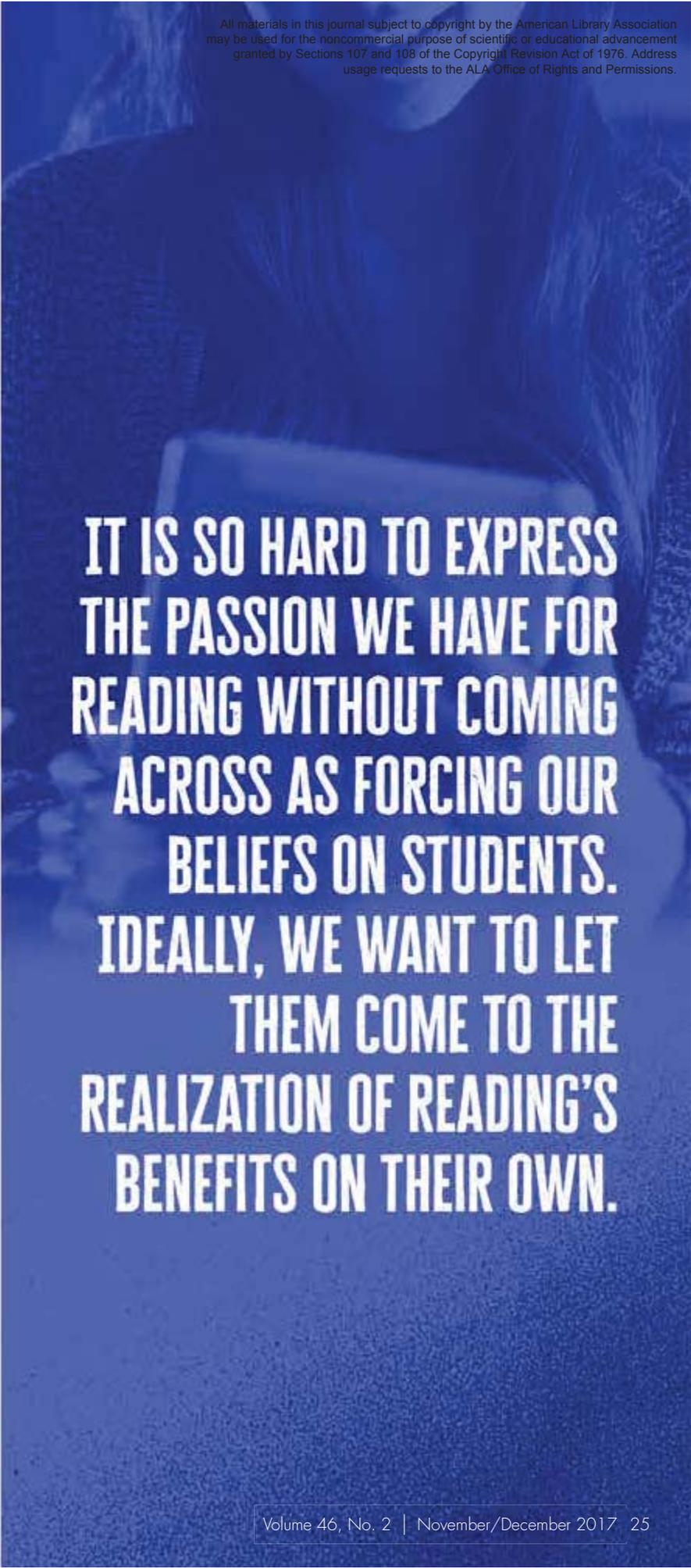
Nena concluded by stating:

I would try to find books about subjects I was interested in and eat up the material because I was so curious and wanted to know more. Maybe if there had been someone who could provide me with the books or to be able to find more for me instead of me just finding my own books it would've helped me read more back then.

How Do Students View a Culture of Reading?

Most students surveyed attribute being a reader to being encouraged by a person, not a program. Gary, a senior, gave credit to his passion of reading to his parents. "We always had a lot of books at home...My dad was reading me *The Hobbit* when I was four." Thus Gary's love for fiction was shaped. He credited his elementary teacher with discovering his love for nonfiction as well. In elementary school he read very little nonfiction until his teacher decided to pair her students with high school students with similar interests. "I was paired with someone going into herpetology because at that time I was very, very interested in reptiles. So we were mentored and taught about the subject. That was what encouraged me the most in informative, educational reading." Today Gary is an incessant reader, library aide, and shooting for a perfect score on his SAT.

A member of a local high school library council Brad thinks a perfect reading culture is one in which "nobody cares what you are reading, as long as you ARE reading." When then questioned if the quality of the reading material mattered Brad admitted that, although choice is important, quality should still be considered. "Reading poor writing isn't going to make you grow much as a reader other than help you recognize poor writing." Brad also was the type of student to breeze through reading challenges. "I would just log my reading to get the incentive, like tickets or prizes, but then I would never use them because, well, I was reading instead."



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What “Counts” as Reading?

Another question raised to the student panel was what kind of reading counts toward participating in a reading culture. Is this generation of kids actually reading more than ever, just in a different manner? Alexia, a senior and AP student, stated:

People are always acting like you are rude or not paying attention when you are on your phone. Most of the time when we are on our phones, we are looking stuff up. Usually I am looking up facts before I start talking.

Alexia also believes that fan fiction is overlooked as a genre. Whereas Alexia is one who got in trouble when younger for reading all night under her covers, now she says it is hard to pull that off with the pressures of high school, AP classes, and homework. She turns to fan fiction.

It is easily accessible, and a lot of times they have short stories that are easier for me to read [during] breaks so I am not stuck in the middle of a chapter and can't find out what happens for another two hours.

After talking to this student panel, one thing was very clear: they love books. They also love reading online but NOT necessarily e-books. When asked what they read digitally, Gary (the student who was read *The Hobbit*

at age four) answered he read online forums so he could post things to incite arguments, as well as reading Gamer Guides because how else are you supposed to advance quickly? Of course, Alexia mentioned her fan fiction and Wikipedia. This declaration incited a very animated discussion amongst the panelists about the “Wikipedia Game.” Unfamiliar? Well, me too, so let me fill you in on what the kids are doing. They pick a random topic/page to go to in Wikipedia and see who can get to the page on a famous person first in the fewest clicks on hyperlinks. For example, they will pick the starting page to be “Berlin Wall” and the ending page to land on to be “George Washington,” and whoever can get there in the fewest hyperlink clicks wins. It is their version of “Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.” This is a perfect example of what “linksters” now consider reading. Meagan Johnson, a generational expert and speaker, defines anyone born after 2002 as the Linkster generation. “We chose the term Linkster Generation because it is the first generation to be linked into technology from day one” (Blair 2017).

Whose Perspective on Reading Do We Honor?

As one can see, kids today are not always thinking inside the box, and by box I am referring to the square of white paper holding words in

a novel. Another example to be aware of is the Hooked reading app. Hooked is a horror-story fiction app through which a whole story is told in text messages or chat format. My eleven-year-old son, to whom I was being one of “those people” by forcing him to read a few minutes a day this summer, asked me if this could count as reading. Of course, I checked it out before delivering a verdict. Interacting with Hooked isn't traditional reading—it is kind of hokey, yet it is also kind of brilliant as far as marketing to kids who don't like reading. We have to start accepting what kids are reading may not be what we read. Downloads of Hooked went from “about 336,400 in October 2016 to 2.22 million in March of 2017” [emphasis added] according to Sensor Tower, a mobile app analytics company (Hartmans 2017). Amazon now also has a similar app called Amazon Rapids for younger children. Once again, we cannot compete with this if we don't start trying to embrace what the millennials and “linksters” regard as reading. It really hits home when your child or a student asks, “Does this count?” Obviously, they are trying to define what reading is by our standards, not theirs.

We see the same discount of reading validity when kids try to read graphic novels for credit or pleasure. David, a seventh grader, stated:

There are large chapter comics/ graphic novels with good qualities of new words and are more interesting and engaging. I think a lot of people would rather read a graphic novel over a full-length novel, and it is good for enticing kids to read. Graphic novels help in getting us to want to read.

To some readers graphic novels are arguably more engaging than traditional books. To truly comprehend the graphic novel, the reader has to engage the sensory details of sight in the graphics and the auditory details being spoken or expressed in onomatopoeias. The best way to explain to those of us who don't "get" graphic novels would be to imagine yourself only listening to a movie. You would not understand the whole plot without the cinematography; if you watched that movie with no sound you would miss the plot as well. You need to absorb both to appreciate the film. The same concept applies with graphic novels. Readers of graphic novels are much more engaged than we sometimes give them credit for, and these novels are rarely counted in reading programs as pages read or as a book.

Readers today are not interested in one-size-fits-all definitions of what it means to be a reader. When asked if being a reader equated success, David replied:

My older brother has dyslexia, and it makes his head hurt and makes him sad to read, so my mom reads to him. I think that he likes stories, just not to read by himself. Being a reader does not mean successful in life or in school. You do not have to be a good reader to be good at math and science, outside of STAAR [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness] and tests; people do not have to want to read novels to find good careers.

Einstein and other computer geniuses were not good students, but great thinkers and hands-on learners.

Rachael, a junior, shared:

I do think some people are more naturally inclined to read than others. I am very cerebral while my sister is more kinesthetic, so she enjoys active activities over reading. Being a reader does not make you "successful," because success is defined differently by different people.

A New Perspective on a Reading Culture?

While reading programs and incentives are wonderful tools to encourage reluctant readers or to offer rewards to those embracing the challenge, keep in mind there are many kinds of readers and types of reading that cannot be measured. Maybe a reading culture isn't how

many pages have been read or if everyone is reading at an elevated Lexile level. Maybe it is about creating a culture where reading is in every aspect of life and just a given. Maybe as Nena believes, it is "people being able to read or listen to what they want whenever they want and not be impeded by stereotypes of people who read. Being able to enjoy what one reads and remember the feelings put into a book." Or maybe it is "Talking about books like people talk about TV shows," as Rachael believes.

After talking to all of these different students and hearing their perspectives, I realized that maybe some schools already *have* a reading culture and librarians just haven't seen it and should start looking through the lens of a student's perspective more often. We have a wonderful opportunity to use our influence to change how others view libraries, but maybe we, as librarians, should take the opportunity to change how we view reading as well.



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Texas. She is also the project manager for a statewide consortium through the ESC's partnering with Follett Destiny that provides library and resource management solutions supporting over 165 districts across the state of Texas. With over twenty-two years of experience in education, including being an elementary librarian and a high school librarian, and holding seven certifications, including Gifted and Talented, and English as a Second Language, she has taught every grade level from Pre-K to college and almost every subject. She is a member of AASL.

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