



A Reading Life

By Teri S. Lesesne

Teri S. Lesesne (last name rhymes with insane) is a former middle school ELA teacher. For the past 25+ years, she has been a member of the Library Science program at Sam Houston State University where she teaches courses in literature for children and young adults. She is the author of three books and numerous articles and columns. She has served TCTELA as secretary, journal editor, and president.

When I was asked to write an article about teachers as readers, my first instinct was to do the following:

Should teachers be readers? Yes.

I realize how snarky this sounded. Of course, teachers should be readers. Research from Nancie Atwell (1987), Lucy Calkins (e.g., 2010), Donald Graves (Donald Graves (e.g., 1991) and Regie Routman (2003) have written about the importance of teachers being “confident, avid readers” (Brooks, 2007). More recently, Miller (2013), Ripp (2017), and Beers and Probst (2017) have posited the same: teachers need to be readers themselves.

In a yearlong study in England, entitled *Teachers as Readers: Building Communities of Readers* (2009), Teresa Cremin, Marilyn Mottram, Fiona Collins, Sacha Powell, and Kimberly Safford noted the following recommendations. Teachers needed to be able to:

- extend their understanding of what it means to be a reader
- appreciate the social nature of reading and the role of interaction and affect in
- recognize the significance of reader identity in reader development and frame their pedagogic practice in responsive ways
- share aspects of their reading lives in schools alongside younger readers
- build strongly reciprocal and interactive reading communities.

While we have more than 40 years of research about the importance of teachers as readers, we still have colleagues who are not those

confident, avid readers Brooks refers to. What is the status of teachers as readers? What might we do to invite our colleagues into the reading club?

Status of Teachers as Readers

My colleague Karin Perry and I have conducted surveys with educators for the past five years asking them about their reading habits and preferences. Our initial findings were so negative that we felt compelled to continue doing the survey as we travelled across the state conducting professional development. We even opened the survey to an online audience. To date, we have more than 2500 responses. They paint a picture that all is not well on the teacher front. Here are a few observations from the data. On average, educators report reading one to four books a month. So, teachers are reading on a regular basis. More than 50% indicate they do not read graphic novels nor do they “read with their ears” using audiobooks. Most of the respondents get their recommendations from blogs and websites. Finally, 90% prefer fiction over nonfiction.

Why should these survey results concern us? Let’s take them point by point.

1. Teachers read one to four books per month. Some read more, but the one to four range is the mode for this survey. A small percentage (1%) report that they do not read at all. Therefore, the total reading for a year ranges between 12 and 48. While this might seem sufficient for keeping up with the reading our students do, sadly, it is not. For example, how many of the following books have you read this year?

- *Shout*
- *On the Come Up*
- *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me*
- *The Lovely War*
- *Pay Attention, Carter Jones*
- *Black Enough*
- *The Bridge Home*
- *Internment*
- *This Was Our Pact*
- *New Kid*

Each of these ten middle grade and young adult books have received four to six starred reviews. If teachers read only one book per month, they would find it difficult to keep up with books honored for their excellence. Now, add in the award-winning books from ALA (<http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia>).

How about these?

- *Camp Tiger*
- *The Undefeated*
- *Another*
- *The Bell Rang*

- *Good Boy*
- *The Important Thing About Margaret Wise Brown*
- *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*
- *Nine Months Before a Baby Is Born*
- *When Aidan Became a Brother*
- *Beware of the Crocodile*

These are the books for elementary students receiving multiple starred reviews. You can see how quickly we might fall behind. And I am not suggesting we should limit ourselves to award-winning books. We also need to be aware of books that relate to our content, books that could serve as mentor texts, and books recommended by our students (see #3 below).

2. Teachers by and large do not read graphic novels. Almost 70% of educators answered that they did not read graphic novels. I have teachers come up to me after professional development on this topic to admit they have never read a graphic novel but intend to correct that now. Graphic novels have been around for some time and can provide many roads into reading for our students. They are winning praise from award committees as well with Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* receiving the Printz Award many years ago. There have been graphic novels on the short list of the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature such as *Nimona*, *Kiss Number 8*, and *Boxers & Saints*. Graphic novel versions of Shakespearean plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *MacBeth* not only welcome readers, they introduce them to the basic story, characters, and conflict of the plays. Adaptations of books such as *Speak*, *The Giver*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and *The Crossover* could lead to some comparisons between the two formats. Visit the Great Graphic Novels for Teens website (www.ala.org/yalsa/ggnt) to locate some graphic novels to bring you into the reading lives of your students who are already fans of this format.

3. Teachers do not listen to audiobooks. More than half of the educators who participated in the survey reported that they did not listen to audiobooks. When asked to rank their preferences of print book, ebook, and audiobook, only 2% listed audio as a preference when reading. Dr. Rose Brock conducted research on audiobooks for her doctoral dissertation and continues to advocate for audio, especially in school library collections. She states, “Listening plays a vital role in communication and it’s an essential skill that students need to function effectively in the workplace; and life in general” (Brock, 2017, p. 170). Further, experts agree that being read to is the most important exercise needed to become a reader. In an online article titled “Audiobooks Support Literacy in America,” the author (n.d.) states that “audiobooks support struggling readers by providing listeners with correct pronunciation and a broader vocabulary. Audiobooks are good reading role models—they demonstrate fluent reading and appropriate phrasing, intonation, and articulation” (Penguin Random House Audio Publishing). Those of us who spend time in our cars can use this time to listen to an audiobook. It is possible to add another ten to twelve books (or more) a year with the addition of audiobooks. Each summer YA Sync offers two free audiobook downloads a week, linking a contemporary YA book with a second book related thematically. You can sign up for 2020 titles and reminders for downloading at <https://www.audiobooksync.com>. For some assistance in finding other excellence in audio, visit the website for the Odyssey Award given annually for the best in

audio and the Amazing Audiobooks for Young Adults. Both lists are located here: <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/amazing-audiobooks>.

4. Teachers receive/seek out recommendations of books from blogs and websites. Recommendations from blogs account for approximately half of the responses with about 25% indicating they get recommendations from their friends. While neither of these is lacking, the troublesome result for this survey question is that less than 5% get recommendations from students. One thing I have learned (and it is reiterated by Donalyn Miller, Penny Kittle, and Kylee Beers, to name a few researchers) is that students are eager to have us read their recommended books. Hence, when I was a middle school teacher, I read *Sweet Valley High*, *The Baby-Sitter's Club*, and other popular titles. I witnessed the Harry Potter craze firsthand with students recommending each and every title. In turn, if I read a book a student recommended, it was easier for me to recommend a book for that reader. I got to know reading preferences that assisted me as I added to my classroom library. I also encouraged students



to add their favorites to the library list of recommendations kept at the circulation desk. You can refer to the Children's Choices and Young Adult Choices list to see books students are enjoying. Check them out at <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/reading-lists/childrens-choices/childrens-choices-reading-list-2019.pdf> and <https://literacyworldwide.org/get-resources/reading-lists/young-adults-choices-reading-list>.

5. Teachers prefer fiction to nonfiction on a nine-to-one basis. It is natural for us to gravitate toward fiction. I can count on one hand the number of nonfiction selections I read as an English major. Yet, research indicates that readers prefer nonfiction as early as kindergarten. The interest in nonfiction is often spurred by the reader's interest in a topic. When my youngest granddaughter was six or seven, she devoured books on snails. Our backyard had been invaded by a walk of snails, and Natalie was consumed with curiosity about them. How many of us seek out nonfiction when we need information about our health? But how many of us read nonfiction for pleasure? NCTE awards nonfiction for children with the Orbis Pictus citation ([\[pictus-award-nonfiction-for-children/\]\(http://www2.ncte.org/awards/orbis-pictus-award-nonfiction-for-children/\)\). Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults \(<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/2018-nonfiction-award>\) does the same for books for older readers. I cannot tell you the incredible pleasure I derived from *Vincent and Theo*, the 2018 winner from YALSA. Finally, since our state standards and tests contain nonfiction, it behooves us to know more about the different types of nonfiction as well as the different features \(call out boxes, glossary, etc.\) that nonfiction may utilize.](http://www2.ncte.org/awards/orbis-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Inviting Colleagues to the Reading Club

So, how do we go about dealing with the shortcomings we see in this survey and in our schools, departments, and professional organization? How do we invite our colleagues to what Frank Smith terms "the literacy club"? Forming a "club" just might be part of the answer. But there are some other ways to introduce fellow educators to some great books to read.

Ask the school librarian to do booktalks when teachers bring their classes to the library. Booktalks are an effective way to learn about books, to decide what book might appeal. Open department meetings with booktalks and have the books to share with other members. If the principal will allow, do a quick booktalk or two to the larger group. Share with them information about author visits in the area. There are many ways to engage them in books. Encourage them to talk to their own students about books to read. Or set up some of your students to do booktalks and invite others in as guests. Once the ice is broken, it is time to consider a book club.

Book Riot offers concrete steps for forming a book club (<https://bookriot.com/2017/08/09/how-to-start-a-book-club/>). Extend an invitation to your colleagues (and include the school librarian). Don't be dismayed if some opt not to participate. The ones who do accept the invitation will be open to talking about books and reading. The purpose of this book club will be to read a young adult book for each meeting. Ask your students to recommend a book they think you should read. Give everyone time to locate a copy (libraries are good places to begin). As a group, make some decisions about the structural details. When will you meet to talk about the book? Will you meet face-to-face or online?

The preceding are the basics. If the club is to be truly successful, it is important that the book discussion is planned and purposeful. Just opening the meeting up with a "So, what did you think?" will get the same results if you did the same in a classroom. Book Riot offers 40 questions (<https://bookriot.com/2017/08/21/book-club-discussion-questions/>) but there are other questions that could be used, such as Richard Peck's 10 Questions to Ask about a Novel (<http://www.michellejnorton.com/ten-questions-to-ask-about-a-novel-by-richard-peck/>). Start with the question you believe will get the discussion rolling. Sometimes it is better to let the discussion take on its own life. The discussion might naturally suggest other questions to ask as well.

Be sure to share any additional information that the club might find interesting or useful. Author websites, video clips of interviews with the author or the author presenting at an event, other books by the author. No matter if your meeting is face-to-face or via Zoom or Skype, an invitation to the author to join the discussion at the end would make a terrific surprise.

After the initial book discussion, it is time to select the next book for the group. Will you take suggestions from the group? How will the decision be made? When will you meet next?

Cremin, Mottram, Collins, Powell, and Safford (2009) talk about the benefits of teachers as readers. When teachers read, they deepen their understanding of what it means to be a reader. They begin to appreciate that reading is a social act and the interaction between readers is significant. Most importantly, when teachers are readers, they are better able to build strong reading communities. Let students catch you reading. Have books on your desk and in your hands. Be one of the readers that your students see daily. Help them build a reading life.

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