

What Are Young Learners Reading?

Or How Does What They Are Reading Fit in with Building a Community of Readers?



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SHARRON McELMEEL

In recent months, as in years past, lists of best books, favorite books, and best-selling books have proliferated the Internet and other media. There was the *New York Times* best sellers list, the American Library Association Awards lists, lists from publications such as *School Library Journal*, the *Horn Book*, and other respected journals.

The list I was most interested in was the list from Renaissance Learning (2014b), a list that purports to tell us what kids are reading. Most of the lists are just that: lists—of popular books based on sales, award-winning books, and such—all aiming to provide clues to readers as to great books to read. The Renaissance Learning list is a little different. It includes the most popular books but only those that are chosen and read by those participating in the Accelerated Reading (AR) program. The lists may be valid in that context, but there are several questions that interest me about this list. And the answers to those questions lead me to the larger question: Who should be deciding what young learners read, and what should impact that decision? There is much research that shows children and young adults read much more and develop life-long reading habits and strategies when they are allowed to choose their own books. In my gathering of anecdotal information and the data from independent researchers, the strategies all lead to promoting the reader's choice of material.

And if choice of reading material is so effective, why are teachers being asked to restrict readers to a minimal list of books supported by available tests, and to test, test, test? After years of studying and discussing Bloom's Taxonomy and the importance of asking questions that require higher order thinking skills, why are educational institutions now using tests that basically ask recall-level questions to evaluate a student's reading understanding? My father, a man with an eighth-grade education, would suggest that many

answers reveal themselves by following the money. In this case, one can look back to the 2014 acquisition of Renaissance Learning. Hellman & Friedman LLC acquired the company from Permira Advisers LLP for \$1.1 billion, more than four times the money Permira paid for the company in 2011 (Banerjee & Carey, 2014). There is no doubt that the company has a vested interest in releasing in-house research that casts the entire testing system in a positive light. As teacher librarians, we are asked to evaluate the credibility of Internet sites, authors, and research. Just how credible is this research released by the parent company of the AR system (Renaissance Learning, 2014a)?

Others who examine the effectiveness of AR may point to the list of books offered to young readers as not being sufficient, varied enough, or diverse enough. I concur with the diversity issue, as the overall publishing field is not diverse enough, but I checked the AR offerings against several lists and found that, for the most part, AR offers the majority of those titles that are included as best sellers, most popular, etc., from other lists. For example, over 80 percent of the books on the *New York Times* best-selling lists do appear on the AR master lists (McElmeel, 2015). So if we fault the AR master list for any failings, those same failings will likely apply to other lists as well. What is not part of this equation

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is that in order for students to be able to read these books for the AR program, to earn points and incentives the school must have purchased the tests for the books. So the master list seems to be adequate, but it is compromised by budget and the selection of teachers, administrators, librarians, or whoever purchases the tests. The list is further compromised by those actually administering the AR program as goals are established and levels and expectations are decided upon. The choices young readers are allowed to make are guided by status and nostalgia (Reese, 2015), both in terms of diversity and interests. Often the selections are narrowed even further by the restrictions of an assigned reading level. There is much to be concerned about the process of leveling, both the assignment of points and levels and levels in general. In all the years I have taught, I have yet to figure out the real difference between a 2.9 and a 3.5. I've had students who have read books labeled 6.9 and then enjoy one that is labeled 3.0. It is a matter of interest, subtle humor, schema, vocabulary, and prior experience with the book itself. And then there is the matter of points assigned. Since the great majority of the reason for reading in the AR system seems to center on the points assigned, why would one, for instance, choose *Little Red Riding Hood* by Jerry Pinkney if it is only worth .5 points when by reading *Abel Island* by William Steig is worth 3 points? To be fair, the AR list says it is merely "what children are reading," not what they are choosing to read. But the list perpetuates choices influenced by status and nostalgia, purported reading level, point value, input of the adults guiding the program, and the amount and selection of tests that the school has been able to purchase. Krashen, in an exhaustive study in 2003, concluded that the extended time allotted for actual reading and increased access to books that is part of the AR system is, as in other systems, providing a similar access and time allocation, a positive element of a child's reading growth. However, the testing element and extrinsic reward system does not impact readers in a positive manner. In fact, in terms of becoming a life-long

reader, the extrinsic motivation tends to neutralize intrinsic motivation and inhibits the long-term motivation to read for the value of reading.

AR is not a reading program but rather a testing program that is best at demonstrating to teachers that their student has read the book—maybe, more about that later. It purports to assess whether a student has read a book through tests for each book—the same tests that schools must purchase. In searching what other literacy advocates have to say about AR, I found some interesting comments:

- Jim Trelease (2013), a popular speaker, nationally recognized literacy advocate, and once a supporter of accelerated reading, becomes quite critical in *The Read-Aloud Handbook*.
- Mark Pennington (2010), a reading specialist who has authored comprehensive reading intervention curriculum, wrote an essay titled "18 Reasons Not to Use Accelerated Reader."
- Steven Krashen (2003), a long-time literacy researcher, presents some convincing evidence regarding the benefits (or nonbenefits) of systems that rely on extrinsic incentives to motivate readers.
- Susan Straight (2009), a parent, writer, and *New York Times* essayist, examines the connection between AR and her own two daughters' reading in an essay "Reading by the Numbers."

And there are direct quotes that seem pithy and really zero in on the criticism of those who would control what children are reading and who should be deciding, as well as the absurdity of incessant testing.

- Jim Trelease (2013) summed up thoughts on testing with his oft-quoted comment, "Testing children more often is like weighing the cattle more often and expecting them to get fatter." Trelease (2014) also shares many other situations and statistics on his site.
- Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Dr. Diane Ravitch has

been quoted as saying, "The most brilliant and intelligent minds do not shine in standardized tests because they do not have standardized minds" (Neufeld, 2015)

WHAT DOES MOTIVATE READERS?

One of the first years that I ever stepped in front of a class of students, I was faced with twenty sixth-graders who were average readers, and six boys who were being instructed at the fourth-grade level but were probably not reading above the second-grade level. I was starting with this classroom in the middle of the year, so many students were already set in their ways. It was clear that the group of six did not like to read. As an education student, I had not had a class in teaching reading, but here I was with twenty-six sixth graders in a self-contained class. We had basal readers, and I could follow the directions. The district had purchased a new reading series, and to my mind the stories were rather interesting. Not so to my group of six boys. Ever since kindergarten they had had the benefit of a special reading teacher who had taught them every phonics rule invented. They taught me the phonics rules. Sometimes I found out they had to know what the word was before they could figure out what rule to use, but they could recite the rule.

We did not have a school library (before their day in our district), but we did have an accessible public library. I had a few books in the classroom, so being the naïve person I was, I thought that while I wrote the next week's lesson plans (the era of no prep time) I would let the students free read. They had a choice of reading anything in the room that they could commandeer, bringing a book of their choice, or listening to a recording of the social studies text. My students began to look forward to the Friday afternoon reading time. Some did listen to the recordings, but by about the fourth Friday, I realized that each student was engrossed in a real book. Not a textbook, not an audio recording, but a library book. I walked over to one of the group of

six, Stan, and being rather curious about what he was reading, I asked him to read a little of it to me. He read the book much more fluently than anything I had heard him read to that point. He was wrapping his tongue around dinosaur names that I still cannot wrap my tongue around. His grandmother often took him to the library, and this week she had taken him to the library and let him pick out books to bring to school. He loved everything about dinosaurs. Once he discovered that he could read whatever he wanted in the classroom, he brought books in every day and every chance he got, he read. If he didn't know a word, he just got up and went to someone that he knew would know the word. Everyone helped, with no interruption of what anyone was doing—he pointed to the word, it was pronounced, and he went back and continued reading. Soon the others in the group caught on that they could do that too. And I found out that the local library would check quantities of books out to me to use in the classroom. I had just five months with these learners, and I still marvel that the simple act of choice put these readers into a seventh-grade classroom at a sixth-grade level. They were a little behind, but parents reported back the next year that junior high was a good experience for each of these young learners. Naysayers would point to the fact that they did know their phonics, and I would agree—but that wasn't enough to put those students into the category of reader. Choice is what put them over the edge, and discussions about good books that they chose helped them understand and share what they were reading.

That semester's experience has never left me, and I have seen the benefits play out time after time. From kindergarten to high school, choice has made an insurmountable difference. I remember one intermediate student who went with his father to his fifth-grade conference. His teacher had also taught his older brother and sister. The teacher commented to the boy's father that John (name changed) certainly did not read like his siblings. The father responded, "Oh, yes, he does. He just doesn't read what you or his mother would

have him read." John read newspapers, sports histories, and other materials that he wanted to read, but that was not valued at school, and his reading was not nurtured. Whatever he chose to read was not good enough, so he chose not to read—at least in school. As this student traveled through the grades, he did a lot of fake reading. Penny Kittle (2011) profiles several other "fake" readers. By the time they finished high school, they became real readers. Why? Choice. If you investigate only one of the resources I present in this article, watch Kittle's video. You will be astonished—if you assign a book, if you give a test, if you think the student is reading, you might be wrong. Many students fake read. They use all sorts of Internet sources to summarize plots, find the basics, and learn just enough to take fact-based tests, to convince others that they have really read the book. Yes, they do read the information on the web, so that is reading, I guess, but they are not reading the books you are assigning. If they are reading at all, they want to choose their books. It doesn't matter how much value you see in a book—the reader has to see the value. In testament to that, John became the best welder in his union. He read welding manuals and learned how to set all types of welders—MIG, TIG, food grade—and became a most sought-after craftsperson. He is also an expert on sports teams. He could be a sports commentator but chooses to discuss his knowledge with friends. He reads and learns what he wants and needs to read. Despite the fact that his older sister and brother still enjoy authors such as Isaac Asimov, J. R. R. Tolkien, and many other authors of dystopian novels, John has yet to read even one. All three live full and complete adult lives, all the richer for what they do read.

I can imagine how many movies we would view if we had to take a test and pass it with 85 percent accuracy before we could move on. And if we could not "comprehend" what was going on in the more mature films, we would be restricted to the PG-13 ones. Now sometimes I enjoy the PG-13 films, but I want to choose which ones to view. No *Toy Story* for me, *Paddington* maybe. My choice. But alongside

those movies, I want to be able to choose to watch *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. And, no, I did not get all the subtleties of that film. Later, when my friends and I were discussing how much we liked the film, a comment about one episode was made and I realized I had completely missed the significance of that part. I would have failed the test—but I sure did enjoy the movie.

And sometimes books that are read need time to resonate. I remember reading a book in high school and handing in a mandatory report on it. The teacher was not too pleased—or so I inferred, as she never acknowledged the assignment nor discussed it with me. And she literally ignored my questions regarding its status. During the days when I was in school, in a small rural area, one did not question the teacher. It was literally three years later when I was in a college English class, during a discussion of a classic, that I realized what the problem with the book and the book report had been. The book I read had been one of the few books on our bookshelf in our rural home. And it turns out it was a book about an adulterous affair. I had not realized that, and with no discussion I was simply oblivious to the true subject of the book. But that didn't lessen my enjoyment of the book that I viewed as being about friendship and idyllic escapes to the mountain lake cabin. But I would have failed the test, I surmise.

Later, when my older son was in eighth grade, he happened into the kitchen when I was making homemade donuts, and if one gets the frying grease just the right temperature, the donuts fry on one side and then turn over without any help. My son said, "I always wondered how they did that." Not having a clue as to what he meant, he explained to me that in Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy*, there is a scene where the mother is frying donuts and they turn themselves over. He never understood how that happened. He had read the books several times during his elementary years, and here it was three years later and he was finally figuring out the context. All of our understanding does not have to come in chunks; sometimes we need other experiences to fully appreciate the significance of what we read. That is true of the other



BOOKMARKIT

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PICTURE BOOKS

BUNCHES OF BUNNIES!

Lundquist, Mary. **Cat and Bunny**. Balzer + Bray, 2015. 32 p. \$ 17. 978-0062287809. Grades Pre-K – 1. Two young children have a delightful time dressing up and pretending to be a variety of animals as their friendship develops. Of course, that budding friendship is tested when another child asks to join the fun.

Hopgood, Tom. **Hooray for Hoppy**. Farrar, Straus and Giroux Books for Young Readers, 2015. 32p. \$16.99. 978-0374301293. Grades PreK-K. An adorable rabbit uses his five senses to discover the delights of spring and the world around him. Filled with bright pastel colors and attractive two-page spreads, this book will lend itself to activities for children without any effort!

Maloney, Brenna. **Ready Rabbit Gets Ready**. Viking Books for Young Readers, 2015. 32 p. \$16. 978-0670015498. Grades PreK-1. Just reading or hearing this book read will make children giggle and want to make their own Ready Rabbit to set up scenes like those in the pictures. Ready Rabbit is ready for everything and anything except what he is supposed to be doing! Supporting imaginative play, this book will show readers themselves in the character as he prepares for – well, he's supposed to be getting ready for school.

Dyckman, Ame. **Wolfie the Bunny**. Illus. by OHora, Zachariah. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2015. 32 p. \$17. 978-0316226141. Grades PreK-2. As the bunny family happily adopts little Wolfie, only the young daughter, Dot, realizes that perhaps this animal is more dangerous than anyone imagines. The parents are in bliss and blind to any possible problems as little Wolfie grows and humorous events occur. A fun approach to the joys of adoption, sibling rivalry, and growing families.

Wilder books as well. Not until that same son grew up and married a full-blood Arikara Native American did he reflect back on the other Wilder books. As a child he had read the books several times, but it did not register that the cryptic English and derogatory statements were subliminal messages that instilled a negative view of Native Americans. As an adult he recognized what he had read. The AR tests for the over one hundred titles having to do with Wilder do not touch on that subliminal message at all. A good discussion of the books might have.

MOTIVATING READERS

One of the best techniques for motivating young readers is to increase their access to books of all types. Early on, one technique is for each classroom to help their students get into the habit of reading with their parents every day. To do that, many schools have established a take-home book bag where each child takes home two books every night, reads them with the adults in their home, and returns the books the next day. The books are returned daily, read or not, so that the bag moves on to the next student the next day. A full description of the Read with Me Every Day program can be found on the McBookwords Read with Me site (2015). At the end of each four-week period, every child in the classroom will have an opportunity to have read forty books, two a day for twenty days. The Read with Me site has all the directions, handouts, and letters to parents to help librarians or classroom teachers implement this reading system.

Older readers are motivated by book-talks, book discussions, and in general, sharing and talking about the books they have been reading. Sharing and talking does not translate into quizzing and interrogating. Stephen Krashen's extensive research (2003, 2005) has shown that choice and access to books have the most impact on reading improvement, as compared with other elements of reading instruction. That does not mean that phonics is not important, or that checking for understanding or the teaching of any other strategy is not

important. It just means that of all factors, the single most effective factor is the time to read and access to books. And for some reason, it is that aspect that is the most ignored factor. Effective teacher librarians must find a way to change that.

Another factor is reading aloud to children and young adults. Several years ago, a high school math teacher was participating in a reading motivation class, and he was struggling to figure out how he could apply the suggested motivational strategies to his students. It turns out he had another management concern as well: his students were rather casual about arriving to class on time, and wasting about five minutes before all were in their seats and ready to focus on the math instruction for the day. After some discussion, he decided to use those five to seven minutes to read aloud a mathematical-related short story, a selected chapter from a mathematical-focused book, an excerpt from a biography of a mathematician, or any other related selection. He began the reading regardless of who was in their seat, and he continued for the five minutes. The result: students began to clamor to be in their seats on time in order to hear the day's reading, and at the end of five minutes, the students were all attentive and ready to begin the day's work. The students were also visiting the school library asking for the books so they could read the rest of the story or the other chapters in the book. The impact on their reading and their focus in math was impressive to both the teacher and the librarian.

In a survey conducted by Scholastic, Gormly (2015) reported, "91 percent of kids ages 6 to 17 say they're more likely to read a book if they pick it out." Given choice, learners at every age level, from kindergarten to young adult, are more apt to choose an information book in greater numbers than most adults would have thought. In a survey of the reading chosen by kindergartners, Correla (2011) concluded that kindergartners often chose nonfiction over fictional texts and that there is a "need to use more nonfiction and informational literature with the children" (p. 104). Based on a survey of several studies, Mosedale

(2011) concluded that a significant number of young adults prefer to read nonfiction when allowed to select the books they were expected to read. Providing young learners with more relevant reading experiences demands that we expose even the very young learner to informational forms of reading, i.e., newspapers, informational books, magazines, and so forth. Reading informational books and materials helps learners expand vocabulary and schema—and exposes readers to the language and structure of expository texts. Choice promotes an important initiative in the educational arena today: promoting the reading of informational books that supports the mandate that more nonfiction be included in the curriculum.

TIME, ACCESS, CHOICE

The conclusion that can be drawn from the anecdotes and research cited here point clearly to three strategies for increasing reading power among young readers: provide time to read, ensure access to books, and encourage choice. In addition, educators who inspire the development of lifelong readers will incorporate read-aloud sessions, promote sharing opportunities and discussions as motivation keys, and provide books of fiction and nonfiction, books that are mirrors and windows for students' lives. It is our responsibility as educators to implement the most effective strategies that reach our objectives, to create life-long readers and build a community of readers.

RESOURCES

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