

# The Joy and Power of Reading

A Summary of Research and Expert Opinion

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# WHAT READING MAKES POSSIBLE

A childhood spent among books prepared me for a lifetime as a reader.

—Carol Jago, Past President of the National Council  
Teachers of English

Reading shapes lives; reading even saves lives. Consider the stories of our greatest leaders across time, culture and place. Almost all credit reading as an essential force that catapulted them to success. Thomas Edison, for example, had little formal schooling but was a “relentless autodidact” and profited mightily from reading books in his father’s home library, as well as the Detroit public library (Walsh, 2010).

But Edison’s story has its basis in science; indeed, explicit, systematic cognitive research gathered over many decades provides proof beyond dispute that reading not only builds our brains, but also exercises our intelligence.

## Reading Makes Us Smart

Anne Cunningham, renowned cognitive psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, explains that reading is a “very rich, complex and cognitive act” (2003) that offers an immense opportunity to exercise our intelligence in ways we lose if we don’t read. Hundreds of correlated studies demonstrate that the most successful students read the most, while those who struggle read the least.

These correlated studies suggest that the more our students read, the better their comprehension, vocabulary and fluency – and the more likely they are to build a robust knowledge of the world. In short, reading provides us with a cognitive workout that transcends not only our inherent abstract problem-solving abilities, but also our levels of education. Reading makes us smart.

## Consider These Facts:

- » Reading builds a cognitive processing infrastructure that then “massively influences” every aspect of our thinking – particularly our “crystallized intelligence” (Stanovich, 2003).
- » Children between the ages of 10 and 16 who read for pleasure make more progress not only in vocabulary and spelling but also in math than those who rarely read (Sullivan & Brown, 2013).
- » “Omnivorous reading in childhood and adolescence correlates positively with ultimate adult success” (Simonton, 1988, p. 111).
- » Multiple studies have shown that avid readers demonstrate both superior literacy development and wide-ranging knowledge across subjects (Allington, 2012; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Sullivan & Brown, 2013).
- » Avid teen readers engage in deep intellectual work and psychological exploration through the books they choose to read themselves (Wilhelm & Smith, 2013).

In addition to increasing one’s intellectual prowess and expanding one’s vocabulary, reading also educates the imagination, as Carol Jago said in her National Council Teachers of English (NCTE) Presidential address, “... kindling the spirit of creativity in every human heart” (Jago, 2010).

## The Reading Life

We’ve known for a long time that the best way to help our students succeed is to encourage them to read. To that end, we want our students to discover themselves as readers, to have a sense of their own unique, rich and wondrous reading lives. What books make their hearts race? What topics do they return to again and again? Dick Robinson, President and CEO of Scholastic, sums it up: “You are what you read.” Effective teachers work hard to help their students establish a Reading Identity that declares, “This is who I am as a reader and this is why.”

This research compendium aims to showcase decades of reliable reading research to support you in your ultimate aim as an educator and parent: to help all children become proficient, avid readers who bring passion, skill and a critical eye to every reading encounter.

In this way, our students might grow to exemplify and embrace the words of Myra Cohn Livingston, poet, musician, critic, educator and author:

“Books have more than changed my life – they have made it possible.”

# How to Read the Compendium

Start anywhere and read in any direction. Let your interests be your guide. The compendium is organized around six sections:

- » **Readers:** We profile early, adolescent and boy readers – plus English Language Learners, students from diverse backgrounds and reluctant readers.
- » **Reading:** Avid, high-volume readers build an expansive capacity to comprehend what they read. In addition, they develop robust vocabularies; deep knowledge of the world; and a proficient, fluid reading style.
- » **A Growth Mindset:** Avid, high-volume readers are highly engaged and motivated – with stamina, self-efficacy and a can-do spirit; they understand the joy and power of reading.
- » **Text:** First, at school and in their homes, all children must have access to abundant text of all kinds (print and eBooks, short texts, magazines and more); second, children should develop a sense of genre, text structure and purpose.
- » **Teaching:** Students need daily time at school and at home to read and become avid, high-volume readers; they also need instructional support such as the interactive read-aloud (reading aloud plus conversation about the book), guided reading, book clubs and the benefit of writing about reading.
- » **Family Literacy:** Families with a rich reading culture – books and lots of talk about books – are more likely to raise successful readers.

The compendium does not in any way represent a definitive treatment – the field of reading is vast, varied and vital. When we investigate reading, we explore cognition, linguistics, psychological influences and social-cultural traditions.

Instead, the compendium is meant to provide a brief introduction to the benefits of independent reading, or free voluntary reading, and suggest some of the pivotal research behind these benefits. It's a place for you to begin your own exploration. As our title suggests, we include both research and expert opinion so the references reflect a range of formats – traditional research reports, as well as newspaper and professional journal articles. Additionally, whenever appropriate, we link to the Scholastic anthology: *Open a World of Possible: Real Stories About the Joy and Power of Reading*, a collection of essays authored by some of the leading literacy experts in the country (Bridges, 2014).

Depending on the depth of your interest, you may want to use the references we cite as the starting point for a deeper investigation. Note, some of the links are live, enabling you to read the original research online or download a print copy.

# READERS

Many of the texts I read as a child have been like roadmap markers, showing me a range of life options, suggesting only as a reader but also as a human being.

– Dr. Alfred Tatum, Dean of Curriculum & Instruction, University of Illinois at Chicago

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- » Early
- » Adolescent
- » Boys
- » Diverse
- » English Language Learners
- » Reluctant

## Early Readers

“Children exposed to lots of books during their early childhood will have an easier time learning to read than those who are not.”

– Dr. Henry Bernstein,  
Harvard Medical School

## Key Findings

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- » “Learning to read represents the weaving together of multiple skills, understandings and orientations, many of which have their developmental origins in infancy and toddlerhood” (Snow & Juel, 2005).
- » The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that pediatricians encourage parents to read aloud daily, beginning as early as six months of age (2014). Dr. Pamela High, lead author of the AAP policy, explains the aim: “... those 15-20 minutes spent reading with a child can be the best part of the day. It’s a joyful way to build child-parent relationships and set a child on the pathway to developing early literacy skills.”
- » Children who are routinely read to day in and day out – and immersed in rich talk about books and the various activities in which they are engaged – thrive (AAP, 2014; Cunningham, 2013; Needlman, 2006; Bernstein, 2010).
- » Those children with less exposure to books and print face learning challenges in school and beyond (AAP, 2014; Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Neuman & Celano, 2012).
- » Literacy development is less about a limited critical period and more about “windows of opportunity” that extend across early childhood, culminating perhaps around the age of 10 (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006).
- » Educators and parents alike should feel a sense of urgency, as experiences with books and reading aloud strengthen the neural systems. These systems, which underlie auditory perceptions, attention and language, develop rapidly during the first five years of life (AAP, 2014; Dickinson, McCabe, & Essex, 2006; Mol & Bus, 2011; Cunningham, 2013).



## More to Know: The Miracle of Early Reading Experiences

Earl Martin Phalen is the CEO of Reach Out and Read, a program that promotes early literacy and school readiness in pediatric exam rooms nationwide by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud. Phalen explains both the advantages of early reading experiences, as well as what is lost when children are deprived:

“The brain develops faster than any other time between the ages of zero and three. Because of this, it’s important to foster literacy during the early stages of life. There’s real opportunity in providing parents with books and encouragement to read to their children regularly, sing with their children and engage their children in conversation – all of which prepares our next generation to be successful in school (2011).”

Literacy development is less about a limited critical period and more about windows of opportunity that extend across early childhood, culminating perhaps around the age of 10. So even if a child has limited access to language and literacy experiences in the home, there’s much ground to be gained through literacy-rich expanded learning or mentoring opportunities, such as preschool, extended day programs, cross-age literacy partners and the like. During late infancy and late childhood, synaptic density reaches a plateau – this is the period of maximal responsiveness to environmental input (Huttenlocker et al., 2002; Mol & Bus, 2011).

Pam Schiller (2010), early childhood curriculum specialist, lists five Key Findings from the imaging technology used in neurobiology and early brain development research:

- » The brain of a 3-year-old is two and a half times more active than that of an adult.
- » Brain development is contingent on a complex interplay between genes and the environment.
- » Experiences wire the brain.
- » Repetition strengthens the wiring.
- » Brain development is nonlinear.
- » Early relationships affect wiring.

Again, the “windows of opportunity” suggest especially fertile times when the developing brain is most susceptible to environmental input – and most able to “wire skills at an optimal level.”

Increasingly, we understand that an early, frequent exposure to print has benefits that last a lifetime, including academic success and the prevention of reading challenges later in a child’s life (Dickinson, McCabe & Essex, 2006; Phillips, Norris, & Anderson, 2008). The Mol & Bus (2011) comprehensive meta-analysis of print exposure lends scientific support for this widespread belief that a deep engagement with books and repeated exposure to print has a “long-lasting impact on academic success.” Mol & Bus explain:

“Reading development starts before formal instruction, with book sharing as one of the facets of a stimulating home literacy environment. Books provide a meaningful context for learning to read, not only as a way of stimulating reading comprehension but also as a means of developing technical reading skills even in early childhood.

“In pre-conventional readers, we found that print exposure was

associated moderately with oral language and basic knowledge about reading. Reading books remained important for children in school who were conventional readers. . . . Reading routines, which are part of the child's leisure time activities, offer substantial advantages for oral language growth. Interestingly, independent reading of books also enables readers to store specific words from knowledge and become better spellers. Finally, college and university students who read for pleasure may also be more successful academically.”

## How Literacy Develops and Predicts Later Academic Success

In 2008, the National Institute of Literacy issued its report, *Developing Early Literacy: Report of the National Early Literacy Panel*, and, among its many findings, stated that the foundational reading and writing skills that develop from birth to age five have a clear and consistently strong relationship with later conventional literacy skills. “These six variables not only correlated with later literacy as shown by data drawn from multiple studies with large numbers of children, but also maintained their predictive power even when the role of other variables, such as IQ or socioeconomic status, were accounted for.” **The six variables are:**

- » **Alphabet knowledge: Knowledge of the names and sounds associated with printed letters**
- » **Phonological awareness: The ability to detect, manipulate or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables or phonemes), independent of meaning**
- » **Rapid automatic naming of letters or digits: The ability to rapidly name a sequence of random letters or digits**
- » **Rapid automatic naming of objects or colors: The ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects (e.g., car, tree, house, man) or colors**
- » **Writing or writing name: The ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one's own name**
- » **Phonological memory: The ability to remember spoken information for a short period of time**

An additional five early literacy skills were also correlated with at least one measure of later literacy achievement, including:

- » **Concepts about print: Knowledge of print conventions (e.g., left-right, front-back) and concepts (e.g., book cover, author, text)**
- » **Print knowledge: A combination of elements of alphabet knowledge, concepts about print and early decoding**
- » **Reading readiness: Usually a combination of alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, vocabulary, memory and phonological awareness**
- » **Phonological awareness: Oral language or the ability to produce or comprehend spoken language, including vocabulary and grammar**
- » **Visual processing: The ability to match or discriminate visually presented symbols**

These eleven variables consistently predicted later literacy achievement for both preschoolers and kindergartners. Typically, these measures were more closely linked to literacy achievement at the end of kindergarten or beginning of first grade, although oral language, when assessed by more complex measures, was found to play a bigger role in later literacy achievement. Children's early phonological awareness – that is, their ability to distinguish among sounds within auditory language – also predicted later literacy achievement.

## Closing Thoughts

Even very young children acquire complex understandings about print when they have been involved with innumerable print encounters and interactions – noticing print in the environment; talking with adults about the functional print they use every day (e.g., the print on kitchen appliances, on food products, on electronic gadgets, and so on); listening to and discussing stories that are read aloud to them from a favorite storybook; playing with language through riddles, rhymes, songs and so forth (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2014; Bennett-Armistead, Duke, & Moses, 2005).

And as they engage with print, young children are not only learning about written language and how it works, they are also learning about the world and how it works. The conceptual knowledge they acquire and the background knowledge they build is cumulative and invaluable.

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## Adolescent Readers

“As kids get older, we have to make a firm commitment that we are going to help them read outside of school. We have to find ways to encourage them to use their time to read ... to engage them, over the summer, before and after school, and make reading part of their lifestyle.”

– Francie Alexander,  
Chief Academic Officer, Scholastic

## Key Findings

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- » Young people do more reading and writing today – on paper and online – than ever before, although they may not always read the kind of texts that adults value (International Reading Association, 2014; Moje et al., 2008).
- » Teens are reading a wide variety of texts including traditional print text and digital (multimodal) text (International Reading Association, 2014, Moje et al. 2008; Burke 2013).
- » Youth use print texts in the context of other activities in their lives – often with social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual purposes (Wilhelm & Smith, 2013; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Moje et al, 2008).
- » Adolescent reading and writing practices “foster communication, relationships and self-expression among peers and family members; support their economic and psychological health; and allow them to construct ... identities that offer them power in their everyday lives” (Moje, et al. 2008, p. 31).
- » Jeff Wilhelm and Michael Smith’s research on the nature and variety of the pleasure avid adolescent readers take from their out-of-school reading demonstrates that **pleasure is not incidental to reading – it’s essential**. The authors explain: “We found that the young people with whom we worked spoke of their reading pleasure with remarkable sophistication – and their pleasure supported the intense and high-level engagement with texts that schools seek to foster.”
- » **Effective teachers understand the importance of adolescent choice and ownership, as well as the importance of helping teens develop a sense of their own reading lives** (Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2013; Tatum, 2013; 2009; Guthrie, 2012; Gallagher 2009; Atwell, 2007).

## More to Know

Early adolescence and the shift to middle school represent a significant milestone for most students. In addition to encountering more demanding literacy challenges across the disciplines, middle school students experience a multi-faceted relationship with reading and writing – both at school and at home.

Adolescents crave social connection. For young teens, literacy is shaped by popular culture, family influences and relationships with their peers (Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Moje, 2007; Gruwell, 2007). Their texts include clothing logos, music, specialty magazines, websites, popular and classical literature – as well as the ubiquitous social media.

Engagement is a central force in adolescent literacy learning. It's simple cause and effect: adolescents who see something of value in school reading, read and enjoy academic success. And those who don't, don't read and typically fall behind. John Guthrie, education psychologist and literacy researcher, has been at the forefront of research on reading engagement (2008). From his research and that of others, we know that reading disengagement is more often than not the root cause of school failure and dropouts.

Today's adolescents, given their 24/7 plugged-in, online status, texting, tweeting and tinkering with their digital profiles, might claim, "Reading is my life." A study by the Pew Research Center and the University of Michigan (2010) reports that nearly one out of three students between 12 and 17 years old writes and sends more than 100 texts a day (and presumably reads at least as many); and four out of five teens admit to sleeping with their cell phones.

Still, all that digital reading and writing isn't adding up to the high-level reading and writing proficiency required by more rigorous standards. Consider the following statistics, reported by Stanford researcher Michael Kamil, in "Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices (2008)."

- » 26% of students read below the basic level, which means that they do not have sufficient reading ability to understand and learn from text at their grade level.
- » Even students with average reading ability are not up to speed with the ever-increasing, complex literacy demands of college or the workplace.

### What Adolescents Need

In 2012, the International Reading Association (IRA) issued a position paper on adolescent literacy, defining it as: "... the ability to read, write, understand and interpret, and discuss multiple texts across multiple contexts" (p. 2). The IRA recognizes literacy as flexible and multiple-dimensional; it may manifest as traditional print or fluid digital and appear as a book, instant message, text, video game or social media – "all of which can be used as tools for understanding content as well as forming social relationships."

Our 21<sup>st</sup> century expansive world of literacy requires dynamic instruction to match; the IRA position paper lists the following eight instructional supports that adolescents deserve:

- » Content area teachers who provide instruction in the multiple literacy strategies needed to meet the demands of the specific discipline.
- » A culture of literacy in their schools with a systematic and comprehensive programmatic approach to increasing literacy achievement for all.

- » Access to and instruction with multimodal, multiple texts.
- » Differentiated literacy instruction specific to their individual needs.
- » Opportunities to participate in oral communication when they engage in literacy activities.
- » Opportunities to use literacy in the pursuit of civic engagement.
- » Assessments that highlight their strengths and challenges.
- » Access to a wide variety of print and non-print materials.

## Closing Thoughts

As the world around us becomes ever more interconnected and more complex, so the demands on literacy increase: today's new tools and technologies demand ever-higher levels of processing and performance. Access to high-level literacy is more important than ever. In 2014, Common Sense Media issued "Children, Teens and Reading," a report suggesting that teens are pulling away from reading. In 1984, 70 percent of 13-year-olds read weekly, compared with 53 percent now. Forty-eight percent of 17-year-olds say they have read for pleasure only once or twice in the last year, according to another study cited in the report.

Scholastic Academic Officer Francie Alexander makes clear what is needed:

"As kids get older we have to make a firm commitment that we are going to help them read outside of school. We have to find ways to encourage them to use their time to read, woven with all of the other compelling things they have to do. We have to find time to engage them, over the summer, before and after school, and make it part of their lifestyle."

"It's crucial that we make a concerted effort as a country, and school is the place where that can start. That's where we can see that our students have good media centers and good libraries to draw from. Reading is a more important skill and strategy than it's ever been."

"Even though we have more access to the world through technology, there's still nothing like the interaction between a young person and a text, to help them be a better student and a better member of society. None of us is going to experience the whole world in the way that we wish we could through immediacy, but we can experience the whole world through books."

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## Boys

“The data from our study of boys and reading in fact, challenge us to rethink our answers to the most fundamental questions we ask as teachers: Why do we teach? What do we teach? How do we teach?”

-Dr. Michael W. Smith & Dr. Jeffrey D. Wilhelm,  
*Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*

## Key Findings

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- » The standardized NAEP test, known as the nation's report card, indicates that by the senior year of high school, boys have fallen nearly 20 points behind their female peers in reading (Von Drehle, 2007).
- » 80% of high-school dropouts are boys, and less than 45% of students enrolled in college are young men (Tyre, 2005).
- » 70% of children diagnosed with learning disabilities are male (Tyre, 2005). This means that boys are more than twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with learning disabilities.
- » In elementary school, boys are also twice as likely to be placed in special education classes as girls (Tyre, 2006).
- » Harvard psychologist William Pollack says, “More boys than girls are in special education classes. More boys than girls are prescribed mood-managing drugs. This suggests that today's schools are built for girls, and boys are becoming misfits” (Von Drehle, 2007).

## More to Know: Boys Lag Academically

When it comes to reading, girls seem to have the jump on boys. According to a 2010 study by the Center on Education Policy, boys are lagging behind girls on standardized reading tests in all fifty states and, in some states, boys are trailing girls by as much as ten percentage points.

In Virginia and New Hampshire, for example, middle school girls did better than boys in reading proficiency by 15 percentage points. In New York, girls were 13 percentage points ahead. Jack Jennings, the president of the Center on Education Policy, notes: "In the past, boys did not do better in the first couple years of school," Jennings said. "Girls did better. But then boys caught up. The difference now is we're finding that boys are not catching up."

Of course, like most things in life, the reason for the reading achievement gap between boys and girls is multi-faceted. In *Teenage Boys and High School English*, Bruce Pirie (2002) reminds readers of biological differences; for example, boys tend to develop language skills more slowly than girls. And socially, female teachers and librarians typically shape school reading. For some students, reading may be regarded as a "feminine, passive activity," with boys favoring more rugged and active pastimes such as sports or other outdoor activities. Also, boys may not feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings about the books they read. No question it's complicated and, in fact, Pirie cautions that the challenge is best viewed as a gender continuum: "We must be prepared for the likelihood that strategies intended to help boys will also benefit many girls" (2002, p. 19).

Additionally, the acceleration of formal academic learning has hurt boys far more than girls: Boys are far more likely to be held back a grade in fourth grade and then again in ninth grade, an action that promotes a suspension rate for boys that is twice as high as that of girls. This in turn leads to a male dropout rate of 32 percent compared to 25 percent for females (Lamm, 2010).

### Closing Thoughts

Pam Allyn, author of *Pam Allyn's Best Books for Boys*, notes that neither boys nor girls thrive with a lack of engaging instruction and curriculum innovation. She suggests:

"Let's pay attention to the way our children learn best, at home, at school and in the world. Let's embrace unique learning styles and use them to inform our teaching. Let's give our children options that intrigue them and tap into their natural curiosity. Together we can help every child feel empowered in the classroom and beyond."

Finally, as children's author Jon Scieszka reminds us: "The good news is that research also shows that boys will read – if they are given reading that interests them."

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## English Language Learners

“Reading in two languages allowed me to fall in love with a different symphony of sounds and rhythms, landscapes, characters and behaviors. When I began to read in English, I noticed not only a different grammar order, but different life perspectives, too.”

–Dr. F. Isabel Campoy,  
Award-winning Scholar & Author

## Key Findings

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- » Since 1990, the English learner (ELL) student population has increased 150 percent. Approximately one in nine K-12 students in United States schools is an English learner (Goldenberg, 2011).
- » While ELLs typically learn conversational English in two to three years, it can take five to eight years to master the complex challenges of academic English (Cummins, 2008).
- » “Long-term English learners” (LTELs) are defined as secondary school students who are “stalled in their progress towards English and are struggling academically” and need targeted, specific English Language Development (Kinsella 2010; Olsen, 2010).
- » As a result, educators must help ELLs develop more demanding vocabulary, comprehension and oral English skills as a foundation for success in school and life (Kinsella & Dutro, 2009; Wong Fillmore, 2014).
- » The same language-rich, language-integrated environment that helps native speakers acquire literacy also helps ELL students add English to their home language. (Freeman, 2007; Houk, 2005).
- » It’s essential that reading and writing are appealing and significant for ELLs (Edelsky, Smith, & Faltis, 2009; Freeman & Freeman, 2007).

## More to Know: Building On Language Strengths

All students, even those with learning challenges, bring to school a deep knowledge of and facility with their first language. The goal, always, is to build on linguistic strengths of ELLs' first language, while supporting them as they learn their target language, English. Learning to read in a second language requires a complex interweaving of students' cultural, linguistic and cognitive development, understanding that all three together are imperative for strong second-language growth (Freeman & Freeman, 2011).

As Robert Jiménez of Vanderbilt writes, "The best teachers of English language learners use what they know about literacy and what they know about their students to build reading and writing skills. They learn about the role of reading and writing in different cultures and communities; they use students' backgrounds and linguistic skills as a foundation for learning; and they give their students the tools they need to excel" (2014).

Research suggests that the acquisition of English as a second language is enhanced by native language use. Thus, effective teachers, to the extent possible, provide English language learners with trade books in both languages. Researcher Claude Goldenberg of Stanford University agrees that teaching students to read in their first language (L1) promotes higher levels of reading in English; indeed, the research is indisputable. Nearly three dozen experiments and five meta-analyses of the data have been reported since the 1960s; all reached the same conclusion:

Teaching students to read in their first language promotes reading achievement in their target language (L2) in comparison to teaching students to read in the L2 exclusively. The meta-analyses also concluded, not surprisingly, that primary language instruction promotes higher levels of literacy in the primary language (2011, p.691).

It's always important to keep in mind, however, the literacy foundation of each student in question. An English Language Learner designation applies to students, "who vary by age, country of origin, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, degree of access and exposure to formal schooling, and so on. Variations among these factors influence the extent to which instruction practices can favorably impact learning to read in a second language" (Carlo, 2007; Olsen, 2012).

English Language Learners need the following:

- » Multiple Entry Points into English  
ELLs benefit when they are able to draw on the full linguistic support of all four language processes – reading, writing, speaking and listening – and all four language processes should be thoroughly integrated. ELLs benefit from extensive aural support (read-alouds and audiobooks), as well as multiple opportunities for writing. ELLs should be encouraged to keep a Reader's Notebook, using the notebook to write about and make sense of the books they are reading. The full spectrum of linguistic support through multiple language processes enables ELLs to enjoy and make sense of the grade-level books they are reading (Gibbons, 2009).
- » Supports for Academic Vocabulary Acquisition

What about all-important vocabulary? Second-language researcher Diane August (2006) explains the value of the interactive read-aloud, a key instructional strategy (combining reading aloud with conversation about the book) that supports the acquisition of linguistic skills by ELLs: Vocabulary is primarily acquired incidentally, through listening, speaking and reading (Wong Fillmore, 2014; Graves, 2006). Thus, teachers need to immerse students in rich language environments.

One method to expose students to rich language is through interactive shared reading in which adults engage children in rich dialogic discussion about the storybooks. Interactive shared reading has been successful with English-language learners as well as native English speakers (Biemiller, 2006; Silverman, 2007). It exposes students to language not often heard in classrooms and not encountered by young children or struggling readers in the texts that they are able to read. While many studies have been conducted with young children, there is evidence that this technique can be effective with older learners as well (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002).

Students also acquire new vocabulary through texts that they read independently (Goldenburg, 2011). For example, when new and engaging reading materials are added to classroom libraries, English learners increase their independent reading, and they improve their comprehension and oral language development (Worthy & Roser, 2010; Elley, 1991).

Duke (2011) cites the high correlation between academic vocabulary and comprehension and offers several strategies that students can use repeatedly to lock down the meaning of more sophisticated content words. These strategies include relating words to themes and to other similar words. These word associations help build networks of meaning that support reading comprehension.

» Thematic Networks of Meaning

English Language Learners benefit immeasurably from thematic text sets that spiral in difficulty over the course of each school year – as well as across grade levels. Reading multiple texts across the same theme automatically fosters close reading and deepens and refines subject knowledge. As noted by literacy researcher Peter Johnston: “To understand a text deeply, we need multiple perspectives. To understand a subject, idea or concept more deeply, we need multiple texts because each text offers another author’s perspective on the subject” (2009).

The relationship between a given text and the texts surrounding it is often known by the term *intertextuality*. As readers finish one book in a thematically related text set, they experience intertextuality as progressively broadening knowledge within a thematic framework. Each book offers a literacy experience that builds on the previous one, providing a network of support for all students. This support is especially helpful for English learners as they explore key themes across multiple texts, encountering similar vocabulary and understandings that make it easier to

learn and retain new material. English learners get a leg up by developing the all-important background knowledge that enables them to comprehend new books.

## Evidence-Based Writing

Inviting ELLs to write – which consolidates their views and understandings – also helps drive their reading comprehension. Additionally, students learn to synthesize information in their own words and use the text as the basis for putting forth an argument or opinion, all of which provides ELLs with invaluable support (Neuman & Roskos, 2012). Evidence-based writing calls on students to use passages from the text to support their opinions, summations and conclusions. Graham & Herbert (2010) and Graham & Perin (2007) note that writing about text enables students to crack it open and construct meaning and knowledge in more effective and precise ways than would be possible if they were simply reading and rereading the text, or simply reading and discussing it. The benefits of evidence-based writing are abundant and profound:

Evidence-based writing helps students:

- » Think more deeply about ideas.
- » Consolidate and review information.
- » Reformulate their thinking.
- » Organize and integrate ideas.
- » Become adept at presenting ideas explicitly.
- » Engage with texts on a personal level.
- » Draw on their own knowledge and experience.
- » Reflect on their reading.
- » Translate an author's ideas into their own words.

## Reading as the Best Support for English Language Learners

Free voluntary reading or independent reading is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education. Research suggests that the acquisition of English as a second language is enhanced by native language use. Thus, effective teachers, to the extent possible, provide English language learners with trade books in both languages (Pilgreen, 2000; Freeman & Freeman, 2007).

Researcher Claude Goldenberg of Stanford University agrees that teaching students to read in their first language (L1) promotes higher levels of reading in English; indeed, the research is indisputable. Nearly three dozen experiments and five meta-analyses of the data have been reported since the 1960s; all reached the same conclusion:

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question. An English Language Learner designation applies to students, “who vary by age, country of origin, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, degree of access and exposure to formal schooling, and so on. Variations among these factors influence the extent to which instruction practices can favorably impact learning to read in a second language” (Carlo, 2007).

In a now-classic study, Elley and Mangubhai (1983) found that reading significantly increased the reading achievement of children. They studied 614 children (380 in the experimental groups and 234 in the control group) in 4th and 5th grade classrooms in rural Fijian schools with very few books. The researchers provided 250 high-interest, illustrated story books in English per classroom to the experimental groups. The control group continued to use the ongoing English language program that put little emphasis on reading. Eight of the 16 experimental classrooms had sustained silent reading (time set aside in class for children to read books of their choice). The other eight experimental classrooms had the Shared Book Experience (also called shared reading, a teaching technique where the teacher points to the print in full view of the children while reading to the children). They found that after eight months, the pupils in the two experimental groups progressed in reading comprehension at twice the rate of the comparison group ( $p < .001$ ).

## Essential Goals of Effective Instructional Support for ELLs

Second-language acquisition expert Dr. Eugene García (2010) drawing on critical elements of theory, research, and practice, recommends four goals as essential for any thoughtful, research-based intervention for English learners.

- » Provide students with a classroom environment that optimizes both language development and the acquisition of content-specific knowledge. Create a language- and content-rich learning environment; the classroom is filled with text, smart teaching and abundant academic talk about text.
- » Make sure teachers have the instructional support needed to maximize student potential.
- » Increase the opportunity ELLs have to interact with their teachers and participate in learning activities. Ideally, students will participate in daily collaborative conversations with their teacher and peers about grade-level text that all students are reading.
- » Improve and expand how parents and families contribute to the academic growth of their children. Specific objectives and measurable outcomes corresponding to the goal are established to guide program activities and measure progress.

Additionally, integrate assessment with learning and teaching. Draw on multiple opportunities to monitor and document growth, as well as multiple ways of involving families in their students’ developing success. Encourage students to bring their reading books home and share and talk about the books with their families.

## What About Long-term English Learners?

What happens when English Language Learners don’t make the kind of progress that’s needed to become proficient in English? Kate Kinsella has devoted her professional career to this concern (Dutro & Kinsella, 2010; Feldman & Kinsella, 2008).

In *Reparable Harm: Fulfilling the Unkempt Promise of Educational Opportunity of California's Long-Term English Learners* (2010), researcher Laurie Olsen raises concern about those ELLs who don't move forward in their progress with English. She explains: LTELs are defined as secondary school students who are "stalled in their progress towards English and are struggling academically." Her report proposes causes, identifies student characteristics, describes current services, offer suggestions for remedies, offer suggestions on district roles and responsibilities, and provides system wide and policy recommendations. LTELs represent a widely-known, but narrowly discussed issue.

Both Kinsella and Olsen argue for a tightly controlled program of English Language Development where nothing is left to chance. Kinsella maintains that without "informed, intentional instruction in how English works – vocabulary, word usage, grammatical features and syntactic structures – and daily structured rehearsals, Long-term English Learners will not develop competent command of English" T11).

## Closing Thoughts

The aim, always, is high academic achievement for all students. When diversity is regarded and acted on as a resource for teaching and learning – instead of a problem – all students thrive (Borrero & Bird, 2009). All learn how to create meaning, communicate that meaning and extend meaning in ways that engage their intellectual abilities and promote both academic and lifelong success.

English Language Learners need intensive and comprehensive oral English Language Development (ELD), particularly in academic English – the vocabulary, syntax, genres and discourse that are essential for more abstract, formal and demanding academic success (Kinsella & Dutro, 2009; Olsen, 2010). ELLs also need academic content. Content knowledge is essential for reading comprehension and general academic success (Goldenberg, 2011). Again and again, the research shows that one of the most efficient and effective ways to deliver both is through wide, extensive reading.

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## Diverse Learners

“By 2035, students of color will be a majority in our schools, with increasing populations of children of immigrant and migrant families expanding the presence of cultural diversity in schools ... teachers must adjust curriculum, materials and support to ensure that each student has equity of access to high quality learning.”

– Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson,  
University of Virginia

## Key Findings

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- » Trade books are powerful instructional tools for meeting the needs of a variety of students with diverse learning styles. (Worthy & Roser, 2010; Flippo, 2003).
- » In our increasingly diverse nation and interconnected world, students need global awareness and a deep understanding of, and respect for, cultural equity and diversity. The IRA, NCTE and new rigorous standards call upon us to help our students understand other perspectives and culture.
- » In Elley's 1998 study of free voluntary reading, in all cases, children who were encouraged to read for pleasure outperformed traditionally taught students on standardized tests of reading comprehension and other measures of literacy.
- » Literature has always played a pivotal role in helping our students transcend boundaries created by ethnic, cultural and linguistic differences. “Literature helps children develop their cultural identities as it allows them to understand and appreciate the cultures of others.” It's often the first step toward “eliminating stereotyping and prejudice and helping students develop cultural identity” (Craft Al-Hazza & Bucher, 2008).

## More to Know: Value Students' Literate Experiences

Typically, school literacy centers around reading, writing, listening and speaking – and traditional texts and textbooks. Spears-Bunton and Powell (2009) suggest that this view of literacy is narrow; as a result, students who experience alternative literate experiences in their homes and communities – which aren't valued by the school – may be viewed as “at-risk.” For example, while some African-American children may not routinely enjoy a bedtime story, they may, instead, enjoy a rich, complex literate experience in their church and choir. It's essential that educators work to understand and value the literate experiences every child brings to school. As well-known educator Phyllis Hunter (2012) reminds us:

“What do we consider reading? If we're talking Hamlet or the Federalist Papers, kids may not be reading as much. But if we recognize the time they spend on the Internet and with social media as opportunities for reading and writing, then the number of minutes kids these days spend on both is not declining (p. 15).”

Effective teachers of reading understand that children from culturally diverse backgrounds learn best when the classroom environment is respectful of their linguistic, social and cultural heritage. These teachers surround their students with culturally appropriate and relevant trade books that capitalize on the background knowledge and experiences that their students bring to school. By connecting these children with meaningful culturally responsive books they can relate to, teachers validate and build on their students' cultural and world knowledge. A rich classroom collection of culturally responsive trade books acknowledges the background experience of culturally diverse students, bridges the gap between home and school, and enhances their engagement in reading. As Lehman, Freeman and Scharer note, “As technology advances and opportunities for global communication expand, the value and importance of international children's books will continue to grow (2009, p. i).

Scholar Dr. Alfred Tatum promotes what he calls enabling texts, books that are deeply significant and meaningful to all adolescents, but especially important for our diverse students living in high poverty urban environments. Enabling texts, at times authored by writers who have overcome adversity themselves, form a textual lineage that speaks to the rich possibilities of a life both thoughtful and well lived. Tatum believes these books offer their readers a road map to life as they strive to develop their own “plan of action” and a “healthy psyche” (Tatum, 2009, p. 65). Indeed, while Tatum draws inspiration from the liberation literacy of the 19th century inspired by Frederick Douglass, his focus on human development – not simply reading development – gets at the heart of 21st Century Learning Skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Drawing from his work with disengaged adolescents in Chicago, Dr. Tatum saw the need for texts that were provocative and relevant, stories that spoke to the essential questions of students' lives. He also insisted that his students write, not just to develop skills, but as a process of self-discovery and a means of empowerment across four intellectual frameworks that enable students to think deeply about their own human development. As he says, “It's not just about literacy. It's about their lives” (2009; 2013):

- » Define Self: What are your passions, your values and your goals?
- » Become Resilient: How do you stay strong when life puts obstacles in your way?
- » Engage with Others: How do you work with other people to make a difference?



- » **Build Capacity: What can you do to make the world a better place?**

## Closing Thoughts

As leading educator Phyllis Hunter writes (2012), “Every child should find her or himself in the pages of a book.” As teachers work to bring in culturally responsive children’s and YA books that will appeal to their diverse classrooms, they would do well to ask the following of each book they are considering. Does this book:

- » **Reflect the values, strengths and ideals that a cultural group considers vital?**
- » **Represent, accurately, the characters’ country of origin?**
- » **Address complex issues with sensitivity and nuance?**
- » **Portray characters as problem-solvers?**
- » **Feature the diversity most typical in different regional areas?**

By bringing the world into our classrooms and homes through culturally responsive literature, we open windows of understanding (Draper, 2014; Dybdahl & Ongtooguk, 2014; Haddix, 2014; and Parker, 2014).

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## Reluctant Readers

“There’s no such thing as a kid who hates reading. There are just kids who love reading, and kids who are reading the wrong books. We need to help them find the right books.”

– James Patterson,

Award-winning Novelist and Founder of Read Kiddo Read

## Key Findings

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- » “Children must have easy – literally fingertip – access to books that provide engaging, successful reading experiences throughout the calendar year if we want them to read in volume” (Johnston, 2010, p. 363).
- » Teachers play a pivotal role in helping their students find the will to read and the thrill of succeeding (Duke et al., 2011). Successful teachers, without fail, do two things:
  - » Provide their students with the instructional scaffolding (or support) they need to succeed. Anchor videos, for example, grab student attention and deliver the essential background knowledge that enables kids to access increasingly complex text (Hasselbring, 2012).
  - » Match their students with books that they can read with enjoyment and deep comprehension. Hooking kids with terrific content isn’t just fun – it’s the key to our students’ success. As Duke, Pearson and Billman (2011) remind us, “Motivation is highly correlated with learning in general and reading comprehension, in particular.”
- » Students, even those who find reading challenging, thrive in classrooms that are filled with books at different levels, where the teacher celebrates books – creating colorful book displays and giving book talks that promote favorite titles – and students are given choice in what they read, as well as time and support to read it (Pressley, et al, 2006; Allington, 2012).
- » Walczyk & Griffin-Ross (2007) found that struggling readers benefit from some say in what they read and how they read it. In other words, they benefit when they are allowed to choose books they want to read and to slow down their reading and implement compensatory strategies, such as reading out loud, back tracking and rereading, pausing, skipping words they don’t know, sounding out, analogizing to a known word, or using context to predict what word might come next (Zinke, 2013; Cooper et al. 2006).
- » Ehri, et al. (2007) note that providing lots of opportunities for struggling readers to

read texts with high accuracy (99 percent) explained almost all of the success the teachers had in producing accelerated growth. The authors write, “Higher levels [of accuracy] may have been achieved either by the tutors selecting easier texts or by tutors previewing and coaching students more effectively through the texts during previous sessions when the books were introduced (p. 440).”

- » Guthrie (2004), commenting on the results of two large national and international sets of data examining the relationship between reading engagement and achievement, writes, “Based on this massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education and income” (p. 5).
- » The Kids Count report – *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* – makes clear what’s at stake when primary students fail to thrive as confident readers: “Reading proficiently by the end of third grade (as measured by NAEP at the beginning of fourth grade) can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child’s educational development” (2010).
- » Researchers Catherine Snow, et al. maintain that “academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing a student’s reading skill at the end of third grade. A child who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school” (1998).

## More to Know: Successful Reading by Third Grade

Failure to achieve reading proficiency by third grade *disproportionately* affects children from high poverty households and communities. Typically, this developmental lag is the result of differences in resources and opportunities for healthy physical, linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral development. Children who must live with the challenges of poverty have a higher incidence of health problems that interfere with learning, and, what's more, they may lack the early interactions that foster linguistic development, such as rich verbal interactions with their families (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2014; Hart & Risley, 1999), access to books (Neuman & Celano, 2012; 2001) and the daily read-aloud (Adams, 1990).

In her seminal *Beginning to Read* (1990), Marilyn Adams notes that children from higher income families often arrive at school with 1,000 hours of read-aloud time under their belts. In stark contrast, lower income children may not have experienced a single read-aloud – or, if they have, it more typically adds up to just 25 hours' worth – a far cry from the robust 1,000 hours more economically privileged children enjoy.

In his 2012 study, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*, researcher Donald Hernandez notes that third grade is a pivotal point: “We teach reading for the first three grades and then after that children are not so much learning to read, but using their reading skills to learn other topics. In that sense if you haven't succeeded by third grade it's more difficult to [remediate] than it would have been if you started before then.” Drawing from the data of the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Study of Youth, Dr. Hernandez examined the reading scores and later graduation rates of 3,975 students born between 1979 and 1989. His findings, as reported in the Annie B. Casey Report, are convincing:

“He found 16 percent overall did not have a diploma by age 19, but students who struggled with reading in early elementary school grew up to comprise 88 percent of those who did not receive a diploma. That made low reading skills an even stronger predictor than spending at least a year in poverty, which affected 70 percent of the students who didn't graduate. In fact, 89 percent of students in poverty who did read on level by 3rd grade graduated on time, statistically no different from the students who never experienced poverty but did struggle with reading early on. By contrast, more than one in four poor, struggling readers did not graduate, compared with only 2 percent of good readers from wealthier backgrounds. Mr. Hernandez found that gaps in graduation rates among white, black and Hispanic students closed once poverty and reading proficiency were taken into account. ‘If they are proficient in reading, they basically have the same rate of graduation,’ above 90 percent, Mr. Hernandez said. ‘If they did not reach proficiency, that's when you see these big gaps emerge.’ ”

The best way to prevent failure to thrive as a proficient reader is to marshal the support of all involved: families, schools and communities. When all work together to surround children with meaningful literacy experiences and closely monitor their progress, children are more likely to enter the third grade pivotal point as confident, capable readers who will continue to excel in school and graduate from high school. Early literacy, in other words, is the gift that keeps on giving, providing benefits that extend well beyond the primary grades and carry students all the

way through a successful school career to on-time high school graduation.

## Books, RTI and No-Fail Help for Reluctant Readers

“When classroom teachers provided students with easy access to a wide range of interesting texts, the effects on comprehension and motivation to read were enormous.” – Richard Allington

Response to Intervention (RTI) originated in 2002 with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). While its premise was simple, its results are revolutionary: students who struggle with reading no longer face a battery of diagnostic tests administered by a school psychologist, which, in years past, typically led to a special education placement. Now, thanks to the RTI breakthrough, classroom teachers use a series of systematic assessments to determine the strengths and challenges of their reluctant readers. With that data in hand, they are able to create a thoughtful program of systematic, sensitive support for these students inside the comfort of their own classrooms and core reading programs. In other words, rather than referring readers with challenges to the school psychologist and special education, a process which can take months, classroom teachers intervene with targeted small group instruction, typically framed around three tiers that represent a “continuum of supports” (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010, p. 4)

## Easy Access to Good Books

Getting the right books into kids’ hands is the key that opens the way to strategic intervention strategies that work (Taylor, 2000), and – the ultimate goal – engaged readers (Guthrie, 2008). In What Really Matters in Response to Intervention (2012), Dick Allington reports on the striking findings of Guthrie and Humenick (2004): “When classrooms provided students with easy access to a wide range of interesting text, the effects on comprehension and motivation to read were enormous.” Easy access to books that students enjoyed reading had a profound impact on both reading comprehension (effect size 1.6) and motivation to read (effect size 1.5). To put this in perspective, an effect size of 1.0 moves achievement from the 16th to the 50th percentile rank. That’s hugely significant. As Allington notes: “No other features of classroom instruction were as powerful in improving both reading comprehension and motivation.”

Guthrie (2008) explains in no uncertain terms what’s needed to help older struggling readers:

“In the end, if we truly want struggling readers to improve their reading skills, schools and teachers must take drastic measures. School districts must begin to put money into texts. By allocating funds for high-interest books and by adjusting curricula to allow for the teaching of such novels, they can take the first step in this important process. Individual teachers must recognize that is more beneficial to have every student in a class reading a book – despite its content and reading level – than it is to teach Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar to half of a class while the other half becomes more certain that reading is not for them (p.74).”

Karen Tankersley (2005) notes that by the time challenged readers enter middle school, they

have endured many years of frustration and failure. As a result, they are often “skilled evaders who try to either ‘hide out or act out’ so they can avoid reading in front of their peers.” They also typically suffer from a crushing lack of self-confidence with little motivation to engage in an activity that they associate with embarrassment and failure.

Motivation is highest when students feel competent, have sufficient autonomy, set worthwhile goals, receive specific feedback and are affirmed by others. Conversely as learning theorists John Hattie and Gregory Yates maintain (2013), when students suffer “public humiliation, devastating test results, conflicts with teachers or peers, and ability grouping with very little chance of promotion,” they are likely to feel deflated and disengage with the work at hand with self-destructive results.

As literacy researcher John Guthrie (2008) reminds us, “Reading engagement and reading achievement interact in a spiral. Higher achievers read more, and the more engaged these students become, the higher they achieve. Likewise, lower achievers read less, and the less-engaged decline in achievement. It’s the Matthew Effect – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer (Stanovich, 1986). For this reason, it’s imperative to maintain the highest expectations for all students and provide the exemplary instruction and rich, wide-ranging content that fosters intellectual curiosity and enables all students to achieve high academic and personal success.

To this end, reluctant readers often thrive with thematically related text sets or series books. Students benefit from reading across a set of books that are conceptually linked; text sets or series books about the same set of characters automatically create a network of shared meaning that serves as a safety net for those students most in need. They more easily learn the big ideas and shared vocabulary related to a specific unit of study, and that, in turn, enables them to more easily read, write and talk about the books they are reading. Ultimately, dramatically increasing the volume of free voluntary reading by struggling readers – providing the books and magazines that will catch their attention and lure them into reading – and providing the instructional scaffolding they need to move forward with confidence is the best way to help them overcome their challenges (Hairrell, et al, 2010; Allington & Baker, 2007).

## What About Technology?

Ted Hasselbring (2012), a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University who has dedicated his professional life to helping reluctant readers notes that not all students who struggle with reading are developmentally equal: “Some have comprehension and fluency issues. Some are only a couple of years behind. Some read at a below-basic level. Some have profound learning disabilities. Some are recent immigrants who speak little English. Teaching a group of students with such divergent needs is almost impossible, even for the best instructors.” He also notes:

“Struggling readers have no time to waste and need to learn faster than other students if they want to catch up. They need targeted, individualized help, and they need deliberate and intensive skill practice – all at the right level. This is difficult to deliver in a class of 20 or more students.

“And, students who struggle with reading expect to fail. Many of them have never succeeded in academics, so they are no longer motivated to

work hard. They often don't see the value in going to school or listening to a teacher or reading a book. That's why many of them drop out.

"Finally, students who are two, three, four or more years behind in reading have been unable to learn from texts they were assigned in school for quite some time. So there's a massive 'background knowledge gap' they need to overcome."

What's the best way to help these long-term challenged readers? Hasselbring believes that "technology gives us the best chance."

## Closing Thoughts

The instructional support we offer our reluctant readers can make an incalculable difference – beginning with *text*, *talk* and *teaching* – with an understanding that technology, too, offers unique support. These are the essential literacy experiences that all students need on their way to becoming proficient readers and writers.

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# READING

“Reading for me is like DNA woven into the strands of my life.”

—Marva Allen, Novelist,  
Hue-Man Book Store Owner

- » Avid, High-Volume Reading
- » Comprehension
- » Background Knowledge
- » Vocabulary
- » Fluency



## Avid, High-Volume Reading

“The amount and frequency with which one reads, or one’s reading volume, has profound implications for the development of a wide variety of cognitive capabilities, including verbal ability and general knowledge.”

– Dr. Anne Cunningham & Dr. Jamie Zibulsky,  
*Book Smart: How to Develop and Support Successful, Motivated Readers*

## Key Findings

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- » *Volume of reading* is critical in the development of reading proficiency (Johnston, 2011); volume is defined as a combination of the time students spend reading plus the numbers of words they actually consume as they read (Allington, 2012; Guthrie, 2004).
- » The U.S. Dept. of Education maintains that avid reading is a widely recognized precursor to:
  - » Better skills acquisition
  - » Superior grades
  - » Desirable life related to income, profession, employment and other attributes (2005).
- » It is during successful, independent reading practice that students consolidate their reading skills and strategies and come to own them. Without extensive reading practice, reading proficiency lags (Allington, 2012).
- » Students who read widely and frequently are higher achievers than students who read rarely and narrowly regardless of their family income; so students from lower income families who read a lot score higher on reading achievement tests than do their more privileged peers who don’t read (Guthrie 2012; Brozo et al, 2008).
- » “Independent reading is an essential practice, one that develops background knowledge, improves fluency and comprehension, heightens motivation, increases reading achievement and helps students broaden their vocabulary” (Miller & Moss, p. 13).
- » The volume of independent, silent reading that students do in school is significantly related to gains in reading achievement. (Swan, Coddington, Guthrie,

2010; Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2003)

- » Students who read a lot score better on every imaginable test – the NAEP, the SAT, the ACT. Any standards-based reading instruction needs to build in the expectation that students will do a huge volume of reading, and they will spend a good portion of ELA time reading and getting feedback. The reading program in a school must support all students. One of the best ways of doing this is to allow students to read habitually, and in ways that literate people the world over read. Watch your strong readers. What is one factor they all have in common? They read a lot (Calkins, et al., 2012).
- » Fourth graders in the United States do better academically when they ... have greater access to books and other reading materials in their environment. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).
- » Reading volume ... significantly affects ... general knowledge of the world, overall verbal ability and academic achievement (Shefelbine, 2001).

## More to Know: Proficient Readers Read A Lot

When it comes to the role of books and reading in increasing reading achievement, the facts are indisputable. Extensive and intensive reading – also known as avid, high-volume reading – supports not only high scores on reading achievement tests, but also a fulfilling and productive life. “For the majority of young people, enthusiastic and habitual reading is the single most predictive personal habit for the ability to achieve desirable life outcomes” (Bayless, 2010, p. 12). Effective and enthusiastic reading does, as Dick Robinson maintains, create a “better life.”

Habitual, voluminous reading (Atwell, 2007) is the most reliable path to the development of proficient readers; indeed, there’s no other way to become a proficient reader. No matter what we’re trying to get proficient at – ping pong, programming or paddle boarding, we have to practice many, many hours – Malcolm Gladwell (2009) maintains that 10,000 hours is the magic number for optimal success. No surprise, then, that students who read voluntarily and extensively both at school and at home become proficient readers. Indeed, research demonstrates a strong correlation between high reading achievement and hours logged inside a book – or volume of reading. Effective reading programs include time for independent reading of a wide variety of reading materials, including abundant trade books across genres.

How important are time and engagement with books? The difference they make is nothing short of miraculous – engaged readers spend 500 percent more time reading than do their peers who aren’t yet hooked on books – and all those extra hours inside books they love gives them a leg up in everything that leads to a happy, productive life: deep conceptual understanding of a wide range of topics, expanded vocabulary, strategic reading ability, critical literacy skills and engagement with the world that’s more likely to make them dynamic citizens drawn into full civic participation. As Mary Leonhart, author of *99 Ways to Get Kids to Love Reading* (1997), notes:

“The sophisticated skills demanded by high-level academic or professional work – the ability to understand multiple plots or complex issues, a sensitivity to tone, the expertise to know immediately what is crucial to a text and what can be skimmed – can be acquired only through years of avid reading (p. 11).”

Elfrieda Hiebert and D. Ray Reutzel (2010) note that Opportunity to Read (OTR) is associated with literacy performance:

“Foorman et al. (2006) used hierarchical linear modeling to examine the relationship between various instructional practices and impact on reading achievement for 1,285 first graders. Time allocated to reading was the only variable that significantly explained gains on any of the post-test measures, including word reading, decoding and passage comprehension. Other time factors, such as time spent on word, alphabetic instruction and phonemic awareness instruction, did not independently contribute to growth in reading achievement (p.198).”

While the best predictor of reading success is the actual time students spend inside books, reading achievement is also influenced by the frequency, amount and diversity of reading. Avid readers are well acquainted with the joys of a good novel, but they also enjoy reading for a variety of purposes -- exploring informational text, absorbing information to perform a task or sharing poetic text through a range of social media.

Sixth grade teacher Donalyn Miller requires her students to read forty books a year; many of them read more than the required forty, and her classroom, bursting at the seams with her wrap-around-the-classroom-and-out-the-door library (Donalyn stores her overflow books in a storage closet across the hall from her classroom), fosters both avid reading and outstanding test scores. In *The Book Whisperer* (2009), which chronicles her dedication to classroom libraries, student reading choice and independent reading, Donalyn describes an instance during one of her speaking engagements when she was asked by a skeptical audience member how she can justify to her principal the hours of class time she dedicates to students' reading. Her answer was simple: she showed her students' outstanding test scores. But she also explains: "Pointing to my students' test scores garnered gasps from around the room, but focusing on test scores or the numbers of books my students read does not tell the whole story. ...You see, my students are not just strong, capable readers; they love books and reading" (p. 4).

In a classic 1988 study, *Time Spent Reading and Reading Growth*, Taylor, Frye and Maruyama found the amount of time children spend reading is significantly related to their gains in reading achievement. They asked 195 fifth- and sixth-grade children to keep daily logs of their reading at home and at school over a four-month period. They found that the amount of time spent reading during reading period in school contributed significantly to gains in students' reading achievement as measured by reading comprehension scores on the Gates-MacGiniite Reading Test ( $p < .039$ ), while time spent reading at home approached significance ( $p < .068$ ).

In "one of the most extensive studies of independent reading yet conducted," Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) traced reading growth to an array of activities related to independent reading: "They found that the amount of time students spent in independent reading was the best predictor of reading achievement and also the best predictor of the amount of gain in reading achievement made by students between second and fifth grade."

Based on the work of Anderson, Richard C., Wilson P.T., Fielding, L.G. "Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School," 1988 *Reading Research Quarterly*, No.23, pp.285-303.

# Independent Reading

Frequent reading significantly affects a student's general knowledge of the world as well as his/her overall verbal ability, and academic achievement."



## Understanding the Power of "Wide" Reading

Robert Marzano (2004) regards "wide reading," related to voluminous reading, as a key strategy for building academic background knowledge – particularly important for students who may have had limited experience with the world beyond their own homes and neighborhoods. Wide, extensive reading across content areas offers opportunities to transcend the limitations of narrow experience, but it shouldn't be left to chance. Marzano suggests that the most effective wide reading programs are carefully scaffolded, making optimum use of reading resources, time and teacher monitoring. To this end, he recommends eight key principles that characterize successful programs: (p. 42)

- » Access means that a wealth of reading materials is readily available to students, in classroom libraries, the library media center and other school sources. Successful programs connect materials to students rather than rely on students to locate them on their own time.
- » Appeal means that students are encouraged to read materials that are of high personal interest and are at an appropriate level of difficulty.
- » Conducive Environment means creating a positive and comfortable space free of noise and interruptions for students to become immersed in their reading.
- » Encouragement means not only showing enthusiasm for conversing with students about their reading, but also demonstrating excitement for one's own personal reading.
- » Professional development means providing teachers with the rationale and

support for their essential role in fostering wide reading among their students.

- » Independent pleasure reading means that students are reading to satisfy personal interests and not to demonstrate proficiency or knowledge gained by their reading.
- » Follow-up activities are particularly important to deepen the wide reading experience. Students may be asked to interact with the material they are reading (“what is one thing you read today that you found especially interesting”) or interact with their peers about their reading. Follow-up activities are designed to further comprehension and spark conversation, rather than to hold students “accountable” for doing certain tasks.
- » Distributed time to read refers to the frequency with which “wide reading” time is allocated within a school week. Ideally, students will have time every day – both at school and at home – for wide, independent reading.

## Closing Thoughts

To grow as readers, students need to read a lot – both at school and at home (children spend the majority of their time outside of school – those hours should be filled with reading). For those who engage in voluminous reading, the benefits are immeasurable. Avid readers:

- » Expand their vocabularies – Learn thousands of new words incidentally through reading; students with robust vocabularies are successful readers and learners.
- » Deepen and broaden their background knowledge and expand their capacity to comprehend – Read more, learn more, know more – and thus, comprehend more with every book they read; voluminous reading puts children on an upward spiral for continuous growth.
- » Become fluent readers – Learn the music of language – phrasing, prosody, rhythm and rate.
- » Develop awareness of text structure and format – Become with familiar with different kinds of genre, both literary and informational, as well as the structure, format and elements of text; learn that genre serves the purpose of the text.
- » Master the foundational conventions of language – Develop critical understandings about how written language is organized and assembled: letters, sounds and how they work together to create the sound system of written language.
- » Absorb critical information about how to write – Learn to write and control all the foundational skills such as spelling, grammar and punctuation – every time students open the pages of a book they receive a lesson in how to structure a sentence, a paragraph or a whole text; how to begin a piece and end it. It’s no surprise that our best writers are also our strongest readers.
- » Know themselves as readers – Build rich reading lives. Students who are readers can talk about their favorite authors, topics, themes and genres. They understand the joy of reading, deeply and profoundly.
- » Become confident readers with a growth mindset – Develop a can-do spirit and growth mindset about their reading abilities. It’s easy to feel confident and believe in yourself as a capable learner when you’re supported by the wide-ranging knowledge that reading makes possible.
- » Achieve the goals of rigorous ELA standards – Meet the goals of rigorous English-

Language Arts standards and beyond; avid readers do all that and more with every book they read.

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## Comprehension

“The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you’ll go.”

– Dr. Seuss

## Key Findings

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- » The more we read, the more we know – and, therefore, the more expansive our capacity to comprehend (Kintsch, 2004).
- » Comprehension is the “ability to understand the meaning of what is said, or read, as well as its intent” (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013).
- » Proficient reading – which entails high-level comprehension – is a complex process, involving an intricate orchestration of multiple skills, strategies and conceptual understandings also known as *systems of strategic actions* (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).
- » “Text comprehension requires the involvement of many different components, relying upon many different kinds of information and yielding complex mental representations. ... However, text comprehension is not simply the sum of the activity of these various processes, but arises from their *coordinated* operation as a system” (Kintsch & Rawson, 2005).
- » Each reader builds a system for processing texts that begins with early reading behaviors and becomes a network of strategic activities for reading increasingly complex texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).
- » Reading is thinking: within the text, about the text, beyond the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

# More to Know: The Construction-Integration Model of Comprehension

Duke, et al. (2011) provides a cogent explanation of Walter Kintsch's widely-cited theoretical model of comprehension, Construction-Integration (2004):

“We bring knowledge to the comprehension process, and that knowledge shapes our comprehension. When we comprehend, we gain new information that changes our knowledge, which is then available for later comprehension. So, in that positive, virtuous cycle, knowledge begets comprehension, which begets knowledge, and so on. In a very real sense, we literally read and learn our way into greater knowledge about the world and greater comprehension capacity (p. 53).”

Kintsch's own explanation follows this logical line of thinking: When we read, we draw on our knowledge of the world, together with our perceptions of what we believe the text is about, to construct a mental representation of what we think the text means. Under this model, learning is a matter of merging or integrating our mental representations with the knowledge we have stored in our minds. Thus, every time we read, we learn more. Kintsch suggests there are two aspects of reading that must merge for comprehension to occur: 1) the text base – what the text says; and 2) the situation model – what the text means. The text base requires an accurate reading of the text for the purpose of getting the key ideas from the text into working memory. The situation model, on the other hand, integrates information from the text base (words, sentences, paragraphs) with relevant prior knowledge retrieved from long-term memory, which is then folded into an emerging situation model of meaning of the text. Duke, et al. (2011) sums it up:

“If the text base is an account of what the text says, then the situation model can be thought of as an account of what the text means ... Just as knowledge drives comprehension, so does comprehension provide the reader with new knowledge to modify the existing knowledge structures in long-term memory.”

In our classrooms, comprehension begins with learning language in connection with experiences with text – hearing written language read aloud and engaging with and talking about books. In this regard, reading is not just a skill we help our students acquire but an integral part of the way they learn to use their minds – to think deeply within the text, beyond the text and about the text – and engage in the quality, high-level comprehension that the new, more rigorous standards remind us is necessary if our students are to graduate from high school as proficient readers. What's more, the ability to engage in sustained comprehension and sophisticated thinking and reflection is the hallmark of a successful, literate life (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

## Expand Knowledge and Enrich the Imagination

Every day, we want our students to stretch themselves intellectually: to explore new concepts, topics and themes; try out new ways of thinking about books; extend their vocabularies and increase their control over language. We also want them to challenge themselves through wide, varied reading; precise, focused writing; and, always, deep thinking and invigorating conversation. In this way, our students will develop both the conceptual and literary knowledge they need to open wide fiction and informational texts and to read with high-level, quality

**comprehension.** As literacy expert Janet Angelillo reminds us, “**Learning to think powerfully about books is one of the great truths students will learn in school.**”

## What Good Readers Do

While it’s not always easy to understand the complex challenge of reading comprehension, we can watch what proficient readers do and draw conclusions about what comprises effective comprehension. Duke and Pearson provide this list:

- » Good readers are *active* readers.
- » Good readers have clear *goals* in mind for their reading. They constantly evaluate whether the text, and their reading of it, is meeting their goals.
- » Good readers typically *look over* the text before they read, noting such things as the *structure* of the text and text sections that might be most relevant to their reading goals.
- » Good readers frequently *make predictions*, as they read, about what is to come.
- » **Good readers read *selectively*, continually making decisions about their reading – what to read carefully, what to read quickly, what not to read, what to reread and so forth.**
- » Good readers *construct, revise and question* the meanings they make as they read.
- » Good readers *think within the text*; they try to determine the meanings of *unfamiliar words and concepts* in the text and deal with inconsistencies or gaps as needed.
- » Good readers *think beyond the text*; they draw from, compare and *integrate their prior knowledge* with material in the text.
- » Good readers *think about the text*; they think about the *authors* of the text, their style, beliefs, intentions, historical milieu and so forth.
- » Good readers *monitor their understanding* of the text, making adjustments in their reading, as necessary.
- » **Good readers *evaluate the text’s quality and value* and react to the text in a range of ways, both intellectually and emotionally.**
- » Good readers read different kinds of text differently.
- » Good readers, when reading narrative, attend closely to the setting and characters.
- » Good readers, when reading informational text, frequently construct and revise summaries of what they have read.
- » **Good readers understand that text processing occurs not only during reading, but also during short breaks taken during reading and even after reading.**
- » Good readers understand that comprehension is a consuming, continuous and complex activity, but it always *satisfying and productive*.

Adapted from “Effective Practices of Developing Reading Comprehension” by N. Duke and P.D. Pearson, 2002 in A.E. Farstrup and S. Samuels, editors. What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 205-206.

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## Background Knowledge

“When students do not have the knowledge necessary to comprehend a particular text, such knowledge needs to be built; one cannot activate what is not there, and one cannot strategize about things one does not know.”

- Dr. Julie Learned, Dr. Darin Stockdill & Dr. Elizabeth Moje  
“Integrating Reading Strategies and Knowledge Building in Adolescent Literacy Instruction”

## Key Findings

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- » The most important factor in determining how much readers will comprehend about a given topic is their level of knowledge about the topic (Dochy, Segers & Buehl, 1999).
- » Prior knowledge of a subject is fundamental for acquiring new knowledge; it is fundamental to comprehending texts (Hampton & Resnick, 2008; Allington & Cunningham, 2007).
- » Providing students with information relevant to a text or making students aware of already-known, relevant information improves their comprehension (Shanahan, 2012; Routman, 2014).
- » The more children read, the more they build their background knowledge, which in turn strengthens their ability to comprehend. Effective teachers of reading facilitate the expansion of background knowledge by providing frequent and varied opportunities for their students to interact with a variety of trade books (Serravallo, 2012; 2013).

## More to Know: **Background Information – Essential for Comprehension**

Many of us – even as adults who are competent readers – have experienced reading something we had trouble understanding because we lacked the background knowledge to comprehend: technical programming manuals, tax documents or medical results all come to mind. If we're not computer programmers, tax lawyers or physicians, we may falter in our attempts to fully absorb and understand all three examples above. And the failure to comprehend has nothing to do with our intelligence or reading ability, but everything to do with our lack of background knowledge.

The most important factor in determining how much readers will comprehend about a given topic is their level of knowledge about the topic (interest in the topic is also important but often related to prior knowledge). Indeed, up to 81 percent of the variance in post-test scores is explained by prior knowledge (Dochy, Segers & Buehl, 1999). The importance of prior knowledge to comprehension is part of virtually all modern theories of reading (Allington, 2012; Duke, et al, 2011; Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Spivey, 1996).

According to schema theory, prior knowledge about a topic creates a schema – a framework or structure – that supports thinking and helps readers process new information about the same topic. However, if we've had no experience with or exposure to a particular topic that we encounter in a text, we won't have the schema to help us process and understand the new topic. Because comprehension is dependent on prior knowledge, children without knowledge of a particular topic may not be able to comprehend much of what they read about that topic. Indeed, readers who don't possess the knowledge that the writer assumes they have may fill in the blanks with knowledge the author had not intended; even more challenging, a struggling reader may not fill in the blanks at all (Santman, 2005).

### How to Build and Activate Background Knowledge

Fortunately, there's an easy and effective solution: provide students with the background knowledge they need to follow and comprehend the books they are reading – and help them activate what they do know. How?

Before students start reading, they benefit immeasurably from a quick overview of the reading journey ahead – easily and efficiently accomplished through quick two to three minute teacher book talks, picture walks through a book with illustrations, DVD clips, slide shows, vocabulary introduction and definitions, and interactive discussion (“what do we already know about this topic?”) – all can play a role in helping students fill knowledge gaps, enabling them to create the schema they need to process and comprehend new information (Duke, et al. 2011). Additionally, if students are facing particularly challenging content, a history textbook for example, reading historical trade books first may help. The easier, engaging reading builds background knowledge that then will ease students' way into the more challenging textbook.

### Closing Thoughts

Helping students acquire the information they need to process a new text often happens most effectively during pre-reading. “Providing students with information relevant to a text or making students aware of already-known, relevant information improves their comprehension

(Shanahan, 2012). As Hampton and Resnick (2008) note: "In the subjects studied in school, prior knowledge of the subject is fundamental for acquiring new knowledge. It is fundamental to comprehending texts."

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## Vocabulary

“How does one learn the language of literature that is so different from everyday spoken language except by reading books?”

– Professor Emerita Lilly Wong Fillmore,  
University of California at Berkeley

## Key Findings

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- » Children expand their vocabularies by reading extensively on their own. The more children read, the more their vocabularies grow. (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013; Kuhn, et. al, 2006; Allington, 2012; 2009; Baumann, 2009).
- » Vocabulary growth is heavily influenced by the amount and variety of material children read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Conversely, reading comprehension is impacted by the depth and breadth of the reader’s vocabulary (Wong Fillmore, 2014; Tannenbaum, Torgeson and Wagner, 2006).
- » Incidental word learning accounts for a large percentage of all new words learned. Estimates are that each year children learn on average 3,000 words, only about 300 of which are explicitly taught to them in school (Beck & McKeown, 1991).
- » Vocabulary, in particular, is very highly correlated with reading comprehension in the upper elementary years (Duke, et al., 2011; Baumann, 2009; Wagner, Muse & Tannenbaum, 2007).

## More to Know: **Students Read Their Way into a Robust Vocabulary**

According to the research, the majority of vocabulary growth occurs not as a result of direct instruction, but as the result of reading voluminously (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013). Effective teachers of reading know that for students to own a word, they need to see the word used in meaningful contexts a multitude of times. By reading voluminously, students are frequently exposed to words in meaningful contexts, thus increasing their opportunities to learn new words. Even a moderate amount of daily independent reading of trade books has a positive impact on vocabulary growth. Students at all levels who read independently acquire thousands of new words as the result of reading more.

Cunningham & Zibulsky (2013; pp. 282-283) explain:

“It is estimated that an 18-month-old learns an average of five new words a day in order to develop a receptive vocabulary of around 8,000 words by the time the child is six years old. At the time of high school graduation ... the average student knows approximately 40,000 words. In order for a child to increase his vocabulary from 8,000 to 40,000 words in roughly twelve years, he needs to learn approximately 32,000 words between first grade and twelfth grade (i.e. seven words a day, every day of the year for 12 years) ... When we consider that the average school program of direct vocabulary instruction covers only a few hundred words and word parts per year, it seems evident that the type of vocabulary development that is necessary for skilled reading is beyond the scope of even the most intensive programs of vocabulary instruction.”

Effective teachers of reading facilitate increased vocabulary growth by promoting increased independent reading of trade books, both in and out of school. As books are rich in academic words, the extended reading of trade books not only increases vocabulary in terms of quantity, but it also enhances vocabulary in terms of quality. “Written language, including the language found in children’s books, is far more sophisticated and complex than is spoken language, even that of college educated adults” (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013; Allington, 2012; Hayes, 1988). Compared to written language, spoken language is “lexically impoverished.”

### Decontextualized Language

Why is written language so different from conversational language? Shelebine (2001) provides two primary reasons that involve differences in function and degree of contextualization.

- » While a common purpose of conversational language entails “the negotiation of interpersonal relationships,” written language more often seeks to communicate novel or cognitively demanding information (Snow, 1991).
- » The task of written communication is further complicated because it is decontextualized. Writers do not know their readers, are not speaking to them in person, cannot use contextual cues such as gestures and intonation, and cannot negotiate meaning interactively; therefore, written language, in general, and vocabulary, in particular, must be *explicit*.

## The Role for Vocabulary Instruction

Researcher Dr. Isabel Beck believes strongly that effective vocabulary instruction should be a high priority in the classroom because students who are successful in acquiring vocabulary are generally better readers. Beck found that words are learned best in the context of reading followed by rich discussion in the classroom. One of her most significant contributions is organizing words into three tiers based on their usefulness and frequency of use. Beck and McKeown (2002) suggest that for instructional purposes, teachers should concentrate on *Tier Two* words – also known as academic vocabulary – that:

- » Reflect mature language use and appear frequently across a variety of contexts.
- » Lend themselves to instruction, helping students build in-depth knowledge of them and their connections to other words and concepts.
- » Provide precision and specificity in describing a concept for which the students already have a general understanding.

Duke and Carlisle (2011) also cite the high correlation (0.86) between academic vocabulary and comprehension, and they offer several strategies that students can use again and again to lock down the meaning of more sophisticated content words, including relating words to themes and to similar words. These word associations help build networks of meaning that support reading comprehension. In addition, Scott, Skobel and Wells (2008) recommend creating a word conscious classroom where language is discussed and relished daily, and students delight in an exploration of words.

## Closing Thoughts

Increased vocabulary knowledge helps students understand what they read, and reading comprehension is enhanced when students understand the meaning of words. Thus there is a reciprocal benefit to independent reading of trade books. One of the best-established relationships in the field of reading is the connection between vocabulary development and achievement in reading (Kuhn, 2006; Baumann & Kameenui, 1991). Independent reading is the major source of vocabulary acquisition beyond the beginning stages of learning to read (Christ & Wang, 2010). Students who read widely learn the meanings of thousands of new words each year.

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# Fostering Fluency

“Fluent readers raise and lower the volume and pitch of their voices, they speed up and slow down at appropriate places in the text, they read words in meaningful groups or phrases, they pause at appropriate places within the text. These are elements of expression, or prosody – the melody of language.”

– Dr. Timothy Rasinski,  
Professor of Literacy Education, Kent State University

## Key Findings

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- » **Voluminous, independent reading is the primary source of reading fluency** (Allington, 2012).
- » **Unless children read substantial amounts of print, their reading will remain laborious, lacking fluency and limited in effectiveness** (Allington, 2012).
- » **Fluency is not a stage of development. For any reader, fluency varies with the complexity of the text, the purpose for reading, the genre, the reader’s familiarity with the text and the like** (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).
- » “The fluent reader is demonstrating comprehension, taking cues from the text and taking pleasure in finding the right tempo for the text” (Newkirk, 2011; p. 1).
- » Quick ratings of third-, fifth- and eighth-grade students’ oral reading correlated significantly with their overall reading proficiency on standardized silent-reading comprehension tests (Rasinski, 2010).
- » Reading scholars Michael Pressley, Nell Duke and Katherine Hilden (2004) suggest that **reading comprehension challenges may stem from difficulties with fluency.**
- » **Fluency develops as a result of many opportunities to practice reading with a high degree of success** (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001).
- » “Coral reading builds fluency, as well as a sense of community. The daily reading of a school motto song, or other communal text, unites students under a common sense of purpose” (Rasinski, 2010, p. 34).

## More to Know: The Role of Text

Students who relish and read trade books are typically fluent readers. Effective teachers of reading know that fluency develops from an abundance of reading practice with books that readers can read with success. **It's a simple formula: Students read many books at their independent reading level = students become more fluent at reading = students gain competence and confidence as readers.**

A well-stocked classroom library (Scholastic recommends at least 1,500 titles) provides students access to trade books representing a variety of genres, topics, authors and reading levels – ensuring each student the opportunity to experience reading success (McGill-Franzen & Botzakis, 2009). Effective teachers of reading understand that when reading to develop fluency, students need to read books that are neither too hard nor too easy for them. Text that is too hard may impede comprehension, and text that is too easy does not promote vocabulary growth. **Effective teachers know the interests and reading levels of their students and the reading levels of the trade books in their classroom, so that they can match their students to texts that can be read with success. Matching students to text – considering student reading interests and needs – helps establish an optimal classroom learning environment for reading.**

Effective teachers of reading recognize that fluency varies with the type and readability of the text. These teachers strive to provide their students with a wide range of reading experiences with books representing a variety of genres and writing styles. A large and varied classroom library supports student interaction with diverse books.

Poetry and songs that highlight prosody and the music of language are also “ideal for teaching reading fluency” (Rasinski, 2010). **There are numerous instructional strategies, including choral reading, reader’s theatre, poetry coffeehouses, repeated reading and book buddies, which foster oral reading and help children develop both the ear and confidence for fluent reading.**

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# A GROWTH MINDSET

**Fostering a growth mindset builds confidence, perseverance and success in every student.** – Dr. Carol Dwek, Stanford University

- » Growth Mindset
- » Engagement and Motivation
- » The Power of Reading Choice, Time, and Pleasure



## A Growth Mindset

“Academic self-efficacy is the belief and confidence that students have about their capacity to accomplish meaningful tasks and produce a desired result in academic setting.”

– Dr. William Brozo & Dr. E. Sutton Flynn,  
Professors of Literacy Education

## Key Findings

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- » Decades of research by psychologist Dr. Carol Dwek and colleagues demonstrate that we all have fixed and growth mindsets about different aspects of our lives (Dwek, 2007; 2013).
- » A fixed mindset reflects a belief in natural talent: I’m either good at something or I’m not (Dwek, 2007; Glei, 2013).
- » A growth mindset is a belief that I can become good at something through effort and learning (Dwek, 2007; Glei, 2013).
- » Engagement, motivation, choice, ownership and a growth mindset are intimately related (Dwek, 2007; Pink, 2011; and Amy Conley, 2014).

## More to Know: We Can Help Our Students Build Intelligence

Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist, writing in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2007), introduces her readers to two mental constructs: *fixed mindset* and *growth mindset*. As the labels suggest, people with a fixed mindset believe they come into the world with a fixed amount of intellectual firepower. They accept failure as an inevitable reflection of their cognitive limitations. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, refuse to be limited by real or imagined deficiencies of any sort. They believe that with enough hard work, perseverance and practice, success is inevitable.

In his book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character* (2012), Paul Tough characterizes resilience as grit and argues that the personal qualities that matter most (skills like perseverance, curiosity, conscientiousness, optimism and self-control) have more to do with character than with cognition. And these are skills that we can teach.

### Using Enabling Texts to Build a Growth Mindset

Dr. Alfred Tatum, whose research centers on helping African-American adolescent males overcome adversity, believes that placing the right text in the hands of a vulnerable teen is the key to overcoming a fixed mindset and building a mindset of growth and possibility. For Tatum, growing up in Chicago's Ida B. Wells homes, that book was Dick Gregory's autobiography, a book that Tatum explains "released me from the stigma of poverty, causing me to think differently about my life, and moved me to read other texts that strengthened my resolve to remain steadfast as I negotiated a community of turmoil – the Chicago housing projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Gregory's text changed my life" (2013).

Tatum believes that vulnerable teens have lost their regard for literacy as liberation that earlier generations simply took for granted. Frederick Douglass's persistent fight for literacy is legendary – when the wife of his slave master, reprimanded by her husband for teaching Douglass to read, abruptly stopped her lessons, Douglass convinced the white children on the plantation to teach him. As Douglass learned and began to read newspapers, political materials and a wide range of books, he was exposed to a new realm of thought that led him to question and then condemn the institution of slavery.

In later years, Douglass credited *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of political essays, poems and dialogues that was widely used in American schoolrooms in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, with clarifying and defining his views on freedom and human rights.

As he famously remarked, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free" (Douglass, 2003). Hence, the power of what Tatum has termed *enabling texts*, which introduce young people to their textual lineage and build for them an intellectual culture in which they learn to believe in themselves – and develop a growth mindset.

### Closing Thoughts

Amy Conley, an English instructor in Fortuna, CA, draws together intrinsic motivation with ownership and a growth mindset. She writes:

"Pink's Drive argues that employees – and students – after their basic needs are met, are motivated by autonomy, purpose and mastery.

Humans want some control over our tasks; we want real tasks that connect to our world; and we want the opportunity to improve. Extrinsic motivation (grades, bonuses, stickers, prizes) actually inhibit students from succeeding on cognitively difficult tasks. After reading Pink, I learned to unbend myself, make deadlines more flexible, and shape the process more to fit the student. Now, my students feel more control over their process (2014).”

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## Engagement and Motivation

“Reading engagement is more important than students’ family background consisting of parents’ education and income. Reading engagement connects to achievement more strongly than to home environment.”

– Dr. John Guthrie,  
National Reading Research Center at the  
University of Maryland, College Park,

## Key Findings

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- » Motivation and reading comprehension go hand in hand; avid readers read extensively with deep comprehension (Duke, et al., 2011).
- » Motivation works in a spiral; avid readers read more, and their reading prompts increased learning and a passion for even more reading. The reverse is also true (Guthrie, et al. 2012).
- » Intrinsic motivation drives student reading and reading achievement; students who read only for external reasons – prompted by grades, rewards or recognition – do not read as often or as deeply (Guthrie, et al. 2012).
- » Inviting students to choose their own books or suggesting books that they can read and *want* to read has a profound positive effect on both motivation and comprehension (Guthrie, 2012; Allington, 2013; Wilhelm & Smith, 2013).
- » Engagement, motivation and a growth mindset work hand in hand (Conley, 2014).

## More to Know: Motivation Drives Reading Achievement

When it comes to reading achievement, motivation trumps all – it's even more important than family background. In other words, it doesn't matter what education or income a student's parents may have – if students are drawn to read by deep longing and interest, they will succeed (Guthrie, 2008). Think of the inspiring stories of young people who were inspired to read their way out of poverty and all sorts of life challenges (Walls, 2006, and Murray, 2010).

The research is equally powerful and convincing. Many studies show that intrinsic motivation drives student reading. Students who read for internal reasons (interest, pleasure, favorite topics) read a lot and achieve highly. In contrast, students who read only for external reasons – prompted by grades, rewards or recognition – do not read as often or as deeply (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1992; Guthrie, et al. 2013).

Not only do motivated readers engage in significantly more reading than those who are extrinsically motivated, their level of engagement and comprehension tends to be deeper and richer (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2012; Duke & Carlisle, 2011).

What's more, reading engagement and reading achievement interact in a spiral. Higher achievers read more, and the more engaged these students become, the higher they achieve. Engaged readers want to learn, and they are confident in their abilities. They persist in the face of difficulty and keep at it until they have achieved their goals (Guthrie, 2012; Dwek, 2008). Likewise, lower achievers read less, and the less engaged decline in achievement. The spiral goes downward as well as upward. In fact, continued low engagement in reading is often a precursor to dropping out of school (Guthrie, 2008).

### Closing Thoughts

Teachers who foster reading engagement through classroom instruction and high-interest reading materials not only increase the amount of time students spend reading silently, but also their overall reading achievement. At the same time, the research shows that teachers who do not focus on student engagement are actually hindering their students by increasing avoidance behaviors. When students avoid reading, they short-circuit the very process that would help them become better readers. Nurturing young readers is not simply a matter of providing instruction that fosters reading engagement, but also of providing instruction that thwarts avoidance behaviors in the classroom (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

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# The Power of Reading Choice, Time and Pleasure

“I was lucky enough to grow up when ... the most wonderful thing a teacher might say was, ‘Go to the library and pick out a book.’ ”

– Dr. Bill McBride,  
Educator, Author, and Speaker

## Key Findings

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- » Children who read for pleasure are likely to do significantly better at school than their peers who rarely read. Sullivan & Brown (2013) demonstrate that pleasure reading is linked to increased cognitive progress” over time. They recommend that educators and policy makers “support and encourage children’s reading in their leisure time” (p.37).
- » Sullivan and Brown (2013) found that children between the ages of 10 and 16 who read for pleasure made more progress in vocabulary and spelling as well as math than those who rarely read.
- » Wilhelm and Smith (2013) demonstrate that pleasure is always at the heart of engaged reading, and pleasure is multi-faceted. Their interviews with avid teen readers revealed that teens read deeply for a wide range of reasons: play, intellectual, social and “inner work” (psychological and spiritual exploration).
- » According to a 2007 National Endowment for the Arts study:
  - » Nearly half of all 18 to 24-year-olds read no books for pleasure.
  - » Less than one-third of 13-year-olds read daily.
  - » Teens and young adults spend 60 percent less time on voluntary reading than the average.
- » Barry Gilmore (2011) acknowledges that there are many competing interests for students’ time these days – television, the Internet, social media and so forth. But he also maintains that educators “play an enormous role in developing attitudes toward reading.” He suggests that we’ve unintentionally hurt our students by: 1) adhering to the canon of Western Literature and 2) failing to motivate students through choice.
- » As essential aspect of becoming a real reader is knowing yourself as a reader – made possible through wide reading driven by access to abundant books and personal choice (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014; Miller, 2013; Tatum, 2009; 2013; Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

- » “The research base on student selected reading is robust and conclusive. Students read more, understand more and are more likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read” (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).
- » Self-selected reading is twice as powerful as teacher-selected reading in developing motivation and comprehension (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).



## More to Know

Jeff Wilhelm and Michael Smith (2014) investigated the pleasure that avid adolescent readers take from their out-of-school reading in their book, *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want – and Why We Should Let Them*. They demonstrate that pleasure is not incidental to reading – it’s essential. They found that the young people with whom they worked spoke of their reading pleasure with remarkable sophistication – and their pleasure supported the intense and high-level engagement with texts that schools seek to foster. The authors write:

“In our study of the out-of-school reading lives of 14 eighth graders who were avid readers of texts often marginalized in schools (romances, vampire stories, horror stories, dystopian novels and fantasy), we strove to understand the nature and variety of reading pleasure. We found that our participants were remarkably articulate about why they read what they read.

“Our data also convinced us of the importance of choice. Students should have regular opportunities to behave the way adult readers do and choose their own reading. They know the kinds of texts from which they will take pleasure. At the same time, **teachers should expand the possibility of pleasure by introducing students to new books they might not select on their own. If we want students to embrace reading now and always, then we need to keep at the forefront of our attention the rich, complex and profound pleasures of reading.**”

Wilhelm and Smith also found that the reading pleasure their students experienced was multi-faceted and led them to read for a number of reasons – at times, for sheer fun and enjoyment, but also often for the profound intellectual, social-emotional and psychological benefits they received from reading. For this reason, Wilhelm and Smith maintain that students must be free to choose at least some of their own reading in school.

### Report from a Silent Sustained Reading Program

Jeff McQuillan (2001) reports similar breakthroughs with pleasure reading in SSR (Silent Sustained Reading) at a diverse high school in Anaheim, CA. Most of the students were Latino; many came from economically deprived homes and had limited access to books in their homes or communities:

**“Fundamental to any SSR program is, of course, a set amount of time each day for students to read to themselves. Pilgreen and Gribbons (1998) point out that successful SSR programs must be carried out on a regular and frequent basis and not as an occasional activity or tacked on as ‘filler’ on Friday. The teachers started off slowly, allotting ten minutes a day during the first few weeks of the semester. Most students weren’t accustomed to having time for pleasure reading in class, and some needed to work into the habit gradually. No other reading materials (e.g., textbooks) were allowed, and students were not permitted to work on homework or class assignments. Within four to six weeks, the time spent reading was gradually increased to fifteen and then twenty minutes. Several teachers noted that many students can sit,**

do nothing and avoid reading for ten minutes, but when the SSR is twenty minutes, it is almost impossible for students to do nothing. At that point, they start reading. In some classes, students would read thirty minutes, complaining if they were given less time! Teachers report that 90 to 95 percent of their students were, in fact, reading their books, consistent with other reports that have found that, when properly implemented, almost all students take advantage of the SSR time provided (p. 75).”

Not only did these formerly disengaged students, who disliked reading, become “thoroughly enthralled” with their reading, but also, they made progress as readers and writers, showing increased achievement scores in vocabulary development and writing proficiency. In multiple ways, more reading led to better reading.

## The Thrill of Personal Choice

Students are thrilled when they get to choose their own books. Research has frequently found that self-selection is the hook that snags both children and teens and convinces them to read:

- » Allowing students to self-select their books results in more involvement and thus more motivation to read (Sewell, 2003; Gallager, 2009; Pruzinsky, 2014).
- » Self-selection allows students more latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in, as well as developing an ownership of, the reading process (Kragler, 2000).
- » Students choose books that match their personal interests – both narrative and expository texts. Kids are also drawn to books that their friends or other trusted readers recommend. (Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006).

## Closing Thoughts

Veteran award-winning teacher Nancie Atwell (2007) also considers reader’s choice and pleasure essential. Indeed, in her classroom and school (Center for Teaching and Learning), choice is a given: “Kids choose what they read because children who choose books are more likely to grow up to become adults who read books. Students who read only a steady diet of assigned titles don’t get to answer, for themselves, the single most important question about book reading: why does anyone want to? (p.27). She writes:

“Every day, smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading. There it is: the P word. I know, because I’ve felt it too, that there’s a sense of uneasiness among teachers and parents about an approach like a reading workshop. Shouldn’t there be some pedagogic strings attached here? Some paper and pencil and small group activities that look like schoolwork? Because otherwise, isn’t reading class, well, too enjoyable?”

“We need to get over it. When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy

and love reading.”

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# TEXT

“Our celebration of reading must involve the ongoing mission to give *all* children the opportunity to read and to become lifelong readers.”

– Dr. Nell K. Duke, University of Michigan

- » Access to Books
- » Summer Slide
- » Classroom Libraries
- » Home Libraries
- » Genre, Format and Structure
- » Text Complexity
- » Nonfiction
- » Fiction

## Access to Books

“We believe that literacy – the ability to read, write and understand – is the birthright of every child in the world as well as the pathway to succeed in school and to realize a complete life.”

– Richard Robinson  
Scholastic Chairman, President, and CEO

## Key Findings

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- » **Placing books in the hands of children fundamentally influences their chances for both personal and academic success** (Constantino, 2014; Neuman & Celano, 2012; Allington & McFranzen, 2013; Kim, 2009).
- » The most successful way to improve the reading achievement of low-income children is to increase their access to print (Neuman & Celano, 2012).
- » **While low-income children have, on average, four children’s books in their homes, a team of researchers concluded that nearly two-thirds – or 61 percent of the low-income families they studied – owned no books for their children** (US Dept. of Education, 1996).
- » **Being read to, reading for yourself and discussing what you’ve read creates an upward, positive spiral that leads to greater academic achievement years down the line** (Cunningham & Zilbulsky, 2013; Jacobs, 2014).

## More to Know

Susan Neuman and Donna Celano's (2001) seminal study of four Philadelphia neighborhoods – two middle-class; two low-income – reveals the stark reality of lack of access of books for children in low-income homes and communities. The ratio of books to children in middle-income neighborhoods was 13 books to one child, while in low-income neighborhoods the ratio was one book to 300 children (2001; 2006). Alarming, more than a decade later, nothing has changed; indeed, technology – designed to bridge the gap – has, in fact, made the disparity even worse (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

Middle-class parents typically have access to computers in their homes and can navigate technology in ways that benefit their children's developing literacy; on the other hand, poor families – without access to computers in the home – are less likely to know how to use the technology available in public libraries to help their children access print and learn to read. This becomes yet another way in which children with less continue in a downward literacy spiral, while the children with all the benefits of a higher income spiral up.

In their ten-year-long study of access to books, Neuman and Celano (2012) saw a pattern they called “the more the more, the less the less.” In other words, students who had abundant access to books and “were able to read fluently, reading more and acquiring more information,” while students without easy access to books “seemed to develop avoidance strategies, merely tolerating reading without the cognitive involvement associated with reading for comprehension” (p. 23). Given the learning power of reading – what it does to develop the mind – this has devastating consequences:

“Reading has cognitive consequences that extend beyond the immediate task of understanding particular texts. Studies have shown that avid readers – regardless of general ability – tend to know more than those who read little. Further, those who know more are likely to learn more, and to do so faster; in other words, knowledge begets more knowledge.

“This is a stunning finding because it means that children who get off to a fast start in reading are more likely to read more over the years – and this very act of reading develops vocabulary, general knowledge and information capital. Consequently, children's earliest experiences with print will establish a trajectory of learning that is reciprocal and exponential in nature – spiraling either upward or downward, carrying profound implications for the development of Information capital (Neuman & Celano, 2012, p. 23).”

Jonathan Kozol (2005) has called the educational divide between those who have and those who don't “the shame of the nation.” While solving the complex barriers of poverty is largely beyond our means as educators and parents, we can do much to solve the book gap – and therefore, the achievement gap – by making sure all children have access to books.

In 2010, Reading Is Fundamental (RIF), the largest children's literacy nonprofit in the United States, commissioned a research survey – Children's Access to Print Materials and Education-Related Outcomes— an unprecedented search uncovering 11,000 reports and analyzing 108 of the most relevant studies. The research was indisputable: children's book distribution and ownership programs have positive behavioral, educational and psychological outcomes.

### Providing children access to print accomplishes the following:

- » Improves reading performance. Among the studies reviewed, kindergarten students showed the biggest increase.
- » Is instrumental in helping children learn foundational reading skills, such as letter and word identification, phonemic awareness and completion of sentences.
- » Prompts children to read more frequently and for greater amounts of time, increasing their volume of reading.
- » Improves children's attitudes toward reading and learning, in general (Lindsay, 2010).

The researchers also suggest that a reciprocal relationship may exist between access and outcomes; in other words, providing interesting written materials to children increases their reading behavior and achievement, which then, in turn, further increases their desire to read and acquire more books.

Neuman and Celano (2012) make it clear that given the increasing (and alarming) disparity between those who can easily access print and books and those who can't, we can no longer just "level the playing field." Indeed, as these two dedicated literacy researchers maintain, the solution is to "tip it" toward those most in need.

### What About eBooks?

The fourth edition of the Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report was released in January 2013 and reflects the growing popularity of eBooks. The highlights include:

- » The percent of children who have read an ebook has almost doubled since 2010 (25% vs. 46%).
- » Among children who have read an ebook, one in five says he/she is reading more books for fun; boys are more likely to agree than girls (26% vs. 16%).
- » Half of children age 9-17 say they would read more books for fun if they had greater access to eBooks – a 50% increase since 2010.
- » 75% of kids who have read an eBook are reading ebooks at home, with about one in four reading them at school.
- » 72% of parents are interested in having their child read ebooks.
- » 80% of kids who read ebooks still read books for fun primarily in print.
- » Kids say that ebooks are better than print books when they do not want their friends to know what they are reading, and when they are out and about/traveling; print is better for sharing with friends and reading at bedtime.
- » 58% of kids age 9-17 say they will always want to read books printed on paper even though there are ebooks available – a slight decrease from 2010 (66%).



Richard Robinson, the Chairman, President, and CEO of Scholastic responds:

“Today’s children are growing up in a world full of digital information, which makes it even more important for them to know how to analyze, interpret and understand complex texts, to separate fact from opinion and to develop a deep respect for logical thinking. This edition of the Kids & Family Reading Report takes a closer look at the ways in which the increasingly popular use of digital devices, both at home and in the classroom, impacts children’s and parents’ reading behaviors. We found that the percent of children who have read an ebook has almost doubled since 2010 (25% vs. 46%).

“Yet we also heard parents’ concern that digital devices are distracting children from reading. Among parents of children in every age group, nearly half feel their children do not spend enough time reading books for fun – the kind of reading practice that is critical for children to build stamina, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

“Our challenge is to harness the power of technology and kids’ interest in ebooks to build better readers, and clearly the opportunity is there. Of the children who have read an ebook, one in five says they are reading more books for fun – especially boys, who tend to be less frequent readers than girls. In addition, almost half of all children age 6 to 17 say they would read more books for fun if they had greater access to ebooks.

“Whether children read print books or ebooks, the more children read, the better readers they become, and the better readers they become, the more they enjoy reading. But reading practice cannot only occur in the classroom; children need access to books and time to read at home every day. The Kids & Family Reading Report found that having reading role model parents or a large book collection at home has a greater impact on kids’ reading frequency than does household income.

“Furthermore, every child should be able to choose and own the books they want to read, for that choice builds literacy confidence – the ability to read, write and speak about what they know, how they feel and who they are. We found that the power of choice is of utmost importance: nine out of ten kids are more likely to finish a book they choose themselves.

“The formula for every child to become a successful reader is simple: have books available at home at all times and be a reading role model; allow children to read the books they choose to read; and set aside time – 20 minutes or more each day – to read books for fun. With these practices, any child will not only become a fluent, skilled reader, but will also develop a love of books and reading that will last a lifetime (2013; pp. 2-3).”

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## The Summer Slide

“Access to books coupled with minimal family and teacher support enables low SES students to counter 100 percent of the typical summer reading loss.”

-Dr. Richard Allington and Dr. Anne McGill Franzen,  
University of Tennessee

## Key Findings

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- » The “summer slide” or “summer reading setback” is a simple reality for millions of low-income children, often with devastating results. It means that every summer, when school closes and these students no longer have access to books, they lose ground as readers; in other words, their reading achievement slides back.
- » The decline is especially dramatic for students who are most economically deprived (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013). The less economic support the students have, the graver the consequences of the summer slide.
- » Two-thirds of the achievement gap between lower- and higher-income youth can be explained by unequal access to books (Alexander et al., 2007). At best, students showed little or no academic growth over summer. At worst, students lost one to three months of learning (Cooper et al., 2000; Kim, 2009).
- » In addition, because the summer learning shortfall is cumulative, (every summer, low SES students slip further behind) it has consequences that reverberate throughout children’s schooling and can affect whether a child ultimately earns a high-school diploma and continues on to college (Alexander et al., 2007).

## More to Know: The Challenge

Entwisle (1997) used a fall-to-spring assessment schedule and found that children who were more economically advantaged added 47 raw score points over a five-year period on summer vacation reading achievement tests during elementary school years, whereas children from financially strapped homes added only one point. Entwisle developed a faucet theory to explain the disparity. When the school faucet is turned on – that is, when schools are in session – children of every economic background benefit roughly equally, but when the school faucet is turned off, as during summer vacations, children from economically advantaged families continue to develop their reading proficiency; economically disadvantaged children do not.

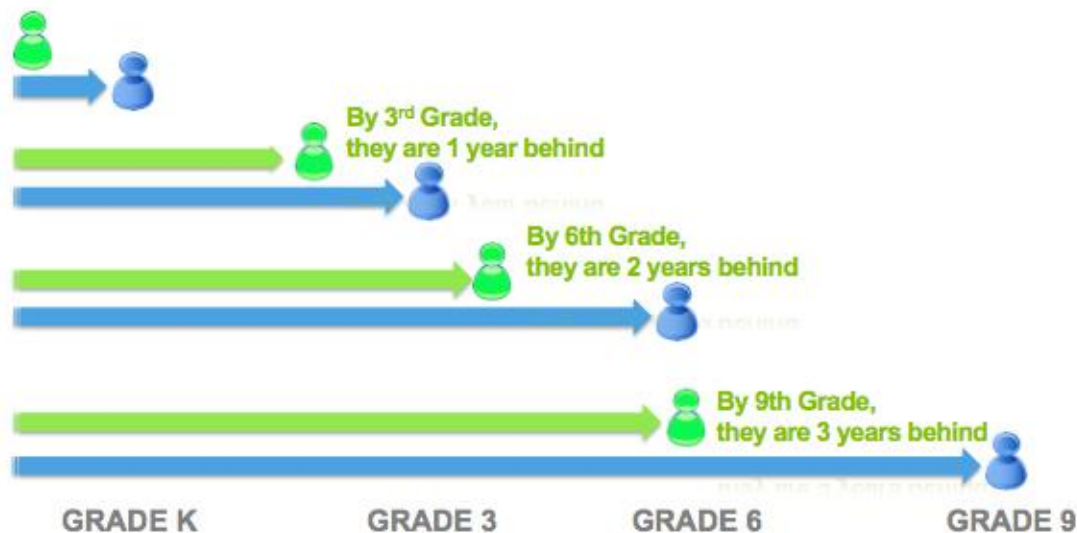
Over a number of years, the accumulated summer loss adds up to a serious achievement gap between children with means (and books) and children without. Hayes and Grether (1983) estimated that as much as 80 percent of the reading achievement gap that existed between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students at sixth grade could be attributed to summer setback. Alexander et al. (2007) and Allington and McGill-Franzen (2010; 2013) report similar findings.

Allington and McGill-Franzen (2010) sum it up:

“Each of these studies suggested that summer reading setback is a major contributor to the existing reading achievement gap between more and less economically advantaged children – reading activity is the only factor that consistently correlated to reading gains during the summer.”

# How large is the rich/poor reading gap?

Children from low-income families begin school about one-third year behind children from more advantaged families



## The Solution

- » New research indicates that sending books home with children over the summer yields great achievement gain and is less expensive and less extensive than providing summer school or engaging in comprehensive school reform (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013).
- » Children who receive and read free books over the summer experience the equivalent of attending three years of summer school – and the difference in fall reading scores is twice as high among the poorest children in the study (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013).
- » When children are provided with 10 to 20 self-selected children's books at the end of the regular school year, as many as 50 percent not only maintain their skills, but also actually make reading gains (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013).
- » In addition, the Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report (2013) found:
  - » 99% of parents think children their child's age should read over the summer.
  - » 86% of children say they read a book (or books) over the summer.
  - » On average, kids say they read 12 books over the summer.

## Closing Thoughts

James Kim (2009) notes that giving children books is essential, but so, too, is providing the instructional scaffolding that children need to successfully read the books. He also recommends that parents, with help from their children's teachers, play an active role in supporting and interacting with their children as readers.

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## Classroom Libraries

“Rather than waiting for students to discover the joys of the library, we must bring the books to the students. Students need to be surrounded by interesting books daily, not just on those occasional days when the teacher takes them to the library.”

– Kelly Gallagher,  
High School English Teacher and Author

## Key Findings

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- » Excellent classroom libraries, school libraries and public libraries are the cornerstone of a successful school reading program (Routman, 2014).
- » Students not only need to read a lot but they also need lots of books they can read right at their fingertips. They also need access to books that entice them, attract them to reading. Schools can foster wider reading by creating school and classroom collections that provide a rich and wide array of appropriate books and magazines, and by providing time every day for children to actually sit and read (Allington, 2012).
- » Students need enormous quantities of successful reading to become independent, proficient readers (Atwell, 2007; Worthy & Roser, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Kittle, 2013; Miller, 2009; 2013).
- » Access to an abundance of books within the classroom results in increased motivation and increased reading achievement (Kelley, M. & Clausen-Grace, N., 2010; Worthy & Roser, 2010; Guthrie, 2008; Routman, 2014).

## More to Know: The Value of Book Floods

We've long known that quality libraries have a positive impact on students' achievement (McGill-Franzen & Botzakis, 2009; Gallagher, 2009; Constantino, 2008; Atwell, 2007; Williams, Wavell, and Coles, 2001).

In their article "Productive Sustained Reading in Bilingual Class" (2010) researchers Jo Worthy and Nancy Roser detail the ways in which they flooded a fifth grade classroom in a diverse, high poverty school, located in a southwest state, with books (Elley, 2000; Gallagher, 2009). Worthy and Roser spent a year monitoring and documenting the students' involvement with their new expansive classroom library and the opportunities it provided for sustained reading both in school and at home. The results are impressive: before the "book flood," only 27 percent of the students had passed the state achievement test as fourth graders; after the book flood, all but one student passed the test and he missed by just one point (p. 250).

At the International Association of School Librarians Conference held in Auckland, NZ, Ross Todd explored the relationship of libraries to academic achievement (2001). A library's impact is especially noteworthy when it serves as support for students' inquiry projects. Todd notes the outcomes when students are invited to follow a line of inquiry as they develop their control of information literacy (a key requirement across the grades of the new, rigorous standards). In this environment, students:

- » Are better able to master content material.
- » Develop more positive attitudes toward learning.
- » Respond more actively to the opportunities in the learning environment.
- » Are more likely to perceive themselves as active, constructive learners.

As Todd notes, "the hallmark of a library in the 21st century is ... the difference [it makes] to student learning ... [a library] contributes in tangible and significant ways to the development of human understanding, meaning making and knowledge construction."

An analysis of data from the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) to determine whether school libraries can reduce the effect of poverty on reading achievement yields a resounding *yes*. The results, together with other studies, confirm that:

- » Variables related to libraries and reading are powerful predictors of reading test scores; indeed, to some extent, access to libraries and books can even overcome the challenges of poverty.
- » One possible remedy to the socio-economic gaps in academic achievement is to make sure that children of low-income families have access to high-quality, age-appropriate books. Having books facilitates children's reading (Lindsay, 2010).
- » A common feature of effective reading programs is student access to a wide variety of appealing trade books and other reading materials. (Allington, 2012).
- » Highly effective literacy educators create print-rich classroom environments filled with lots of high-quality, diverse reading materials. (Gambrell, et al., 2007)
- » Internationally, most fourth grade students (89%) attended schools with libraries and had classroom libraries (69%) (*Overview of Progress in International Reading Literacy*, 2007).



- » Books are a vital component of a print-rich classroom environment (Wolfersberger, Reutzel, Sudweeks, & Fawson, 2004).
- » “Wide reading is directly related to accessibility; the more books available and the more time for reading, the more children will read and the better readers they will become” (Huck, Helper, Hickman, Kiefer, 1997, p. 630)
- » Fielding, Wilson and Anderson (1988) concluded that children’s reading achievement, comprehension and attitude toward reading improve when their classrooms are filled with trade books and their teachers encourage free reading.
- » Large classroom and school libraries that provide ample collections of instructional-level books (Scholastic recommends at least 1,500) play a key role in literacy learning (Routman, 2014; Worthy & Roser; 2011; Gallagher, 2009; Miller, 2009; 2013; Atwell, 2007).

In sum, if our students are to embrace their reading lives, first, they need easy access to an abundance of books across a wide range of genre, theme and topics. Veteran teacher Kelly Gallagher explains:

“Placing students in a daily book flood zone produces much more reading than occasionally taking them to the library. There is something powerful about surrounding kids with interesting books. I have 2,000 books in my room, and because of this, my students do a lot more reading. Establishing a book flood is probably the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career (Gallagher, 2009, pp.52–53).”

Students in classrooms with well-designed classroom libraries:

- » Interact more with books.
- » Spend more time reading.
- » Demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading.
- » Exhibit higher levels of reading achievement.

(*National Assessment of Educational Progress Report, 2005*)

## Closing Thoughts

Surrounding students with books in the classroom helps students develop a sense of themselves as readers (Miller, 2013) by:

- » Allowing students to value their decision-making ability.
- » Fostering their capacity to choose appropriate literature.
- » Giving them confidence and a feeling of ownership.
- » Improving reading achievement.
- » Encouraging them in becoming lifelong readers.

Books open up a world of ideas and introduce students to new ways of thinking. As author Marva Allen writes (2014), “Books open the door to worlds before unimagined.”

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## Home Libraries

“A home with books as an integral part of the way of life encourages children to read for pleasure and encourages discussion among family members about what they have read, thereby providing children with information, vocabulary, imaginative richness, wide horizons and skills for discovery and play.”

– Dr. Mariah Evans,  
Professor of Sociology, University of Nevada, Reno

## Key Findings

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- » Conducted over 20 years, Evans, Kelley, Sikorac and Treimand (2010) surveyed more than 70,000 people across 27 countries and found that children raised in homes with more than 500 books spent three years longer in school than children whose parents had only a few books.
- » Even a child who hails from a home with 25 books will, on average, complete two more years of school than would a child from a home without any books at all (Evans et al, 2010).
- » Research from the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS; Mullis & Martin, 2007) shows a similar impact of books in the home. Surveying 215,000 students across 40 countries, PIRLS 2006 was one of the largest international assessments of reading literacy ever undertaken.
- » Children from homes fostering literacy become better readers. Students had higher reading achievement when they were from homes where their parents enjoyed reading and read frequently, books were in abundance, and students were engaged in literacy activities – from alphabet blocks to word games – from an early age (Adams, 1990; Mullis & Martin, 2007, p. 2).
- » The only behavior measure that correlates significantly with reading scores is the number of books in the home. An analysis of a national data set of nearly 100,000 United States school children found that access to printed materials – and not poverty – is the “critical variable affecting reading acquisition” (McQuillan, 1998).
- » Asking children, “Show me your library” is very powerful; it changes the literacy dynamic. Children think of themselves as readers when they have books in their homes (Constantino, 2014; see <http://www.accessbooks.net/>).

## More to Know: **The Thousand Book Project**

Second and third grade teacher Justin Minkel found a way, with help from Scholastic, to send forty books home with every one of his second and third graders, almost all of whom were English Language Learners from low-income homes without a single book in their homes. Justin, who titled his initiative “The Thousand Book Project” because he ultimately sent 1,000 books home with his students, explains the results:

“Each of the 25 children in my class received 40 books over the course of 2nd and 3rd grade, for a total of 1,000 new books in their homes. The total cost for each student’s home library was less than \$50 each year, a small investment to move a struggling reader from frustration to confidence.

“These 25 students made more progress in their reading than I have experienced with any other class. By the end of the project’s second year, they had exceeded the district expectation for growth by an average of nine levels on the DRA and five points on the computerized Measures of Academic Progress reading test. Increasing this number to 40 or more books had far-reaching effects. Students’ fluency improved because the children could engage in repeated readings of favorite ‘just right’ books, and parents reported increased time spent reading at home during weekends, holidays and summer break. The only incentive for this increase in reading time was intrinsic: the pleasure each child felt in reading his or her own book, beloved as a favorite stuffed animal.”

### Closing Thoughts

Minkel notes that he’s learned four fundamental truths that enable him to do his job: build a relationship with every child you teach; listen carefully to what he or she says; laugh as much as possible; and finally: “To help kids develop a love of reading, put great books in their hands. Then watch in amazement as their worlds change.”

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# Genre and Text Types

“Genres are containers for thinking. They help us to orient ourselves to the kind of story we are hearing and its purpose.”

– Pam Allyn, Literacy Advocate, Educational Leader, and Author

## Key Findings

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- » In order to become competent, literate members of society, students must be able to navigate multiple genres (Lattimer, 2003).
- » Children learn language, both oral and written, when they have a reason to use it. Linguist M.A.K. Halliday argues that the explanation of how language works should be grounded in a functional analysis, since language evolved as human beings carried out certain critical functions. He also maintains that children are motivated to develop language because it serves certain purposes or functions for them (1973).
- » Learning written language is much the same; therefore, Nell Duke, et al. (2012) argue that children learn the concept of *genre* when they have “compelling, real-world purposes ... to use genres” and then receive “instruction in genre features and strategies to serve those purposes” p. 2.
- » Language is inherently social; thus, genres enable social interaction. In fact, Duke et al. (2012) maintain that genres “develop and function to enable social interaction.” For example, in the context of classroom talk, “teacher storytelling” is a genre used to socialize children – to help them understand and accept cultural values and beliefs (Duke et al., 2012).
- » Genres or text types are broadly defined by their purpose; therefore, even young children recognize the difference between a cookbook recipe and the Bible; the TV Guide and a storybook. (Duke et al, 2012). Children learn these genre differences as they use language to navigate the world.

## More to Know: Language is Functional

Today's more rigorous standards focus our attention on the functions of language, as there is renewed interest and emphasis in the classroom on using language to accomplish specific goals.

The more vigorous reading standards divide text into two primary types: fiction and informational/nonfiction. When students are working with fictional texts they are following and remembering multiple events in a story, summarizing texts, noticing and remembering details of the setting, discussing the impact of the setting on characters, and noting the perspective of the various characters as well as the narrator. Examples of fictional genre include:

- » Fables, Folktales and Myths
- » Realistic Fiction
- » Historical Fiction
- » Science Fiction
- » Poetry
- » Drama
- » Fantasy
- » Fairy Tales

When students are engaged with informational text, on the other hand, they learn to search for and use key information, to summarize a text, to draw inferences from a text and to use these inferences to explain the relationships between events and ideas. Examples of informational text include:

- » Current Events
- » Biography, Autobiography, Memoirs
- » Science
- » History
- » Functional Text

Of course, within these broad categories, there are many text types, or genres, each with their own unique structure, vocabulary and format. Which genre we choose to use typically depends on both our purpose and our audience (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). To consider how purpose and audience influence genre and text type, consider literacy researchers Nell Duke and Susan Armistead-Bennett's observation:

“A text written for the purpose of advertising a new car, for example, is fundamentally different from a text written for the purpose of explaining how that car works, which is in turn fundamentally different from a text that chronicles someone's adventures driving that car across the country (2005, p. 19).”

These texts serve different purposes, are written for different situations and feature different characteristics, including text structure, presentational formats, design and lay-outs, vocabulary, illustrations and graphics, and so forth.

### Closing Thoughts

Genre research reveals that even young children are sensitive to differences in text format and structure. Ask a four-year-old to write a shopping list for a trip to the grocery store, and she will



inevitably create a vertical list, perhaps with numbers or bullet points before each needed item (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). Even though the child is using pretend writing to create her list, she demonstrates that she is well-aware of the particular features of “list-ness,” which typically include a vertical display of listed words or phrases (rather than connected text) accentuated by bullet points (Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003).

Finally, John Mayher (2001) makes the point that learning to read is a lifelong process. Over the course of our lives, we’ll meet numerous texts that challenge our focus and comprehension (computer programming manuals, tax forms, warranty tags and the like). As Mayher notes, “Reading is not something that one learns to do once in elementary school; it is a lifelong process of growth as one meets the challenges of new texts” (p. 13).

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# Text Complexity

“Read often. Mostly silent. Focus on knowledge.”

– Dr. Elfrieda (Freddy) Hiebert,  
President and CEO of TextProject

## Key Findings

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- » New, vigorous standards aim to make sure that students are encountering appropriately complex, challenging texts at each grade level.
- » Immersion in complex text, defined by literacy researcher Elfrieda Hiebert (2012) as texts with “complex ideas conveyed with rare and infrequent vocabulary,” is the best way to help students develop mature language skills and the conceptual knowledge they need for success in school and beyond.
- » Research has also demonstrated that the textual challenges beyond high school have increased. College textbooks, as measured by Lexile scores, have increased in difficulty (Stenner, Koons, Swartz, in press) and so, too, in scientific journals and magazines (Hayes & Ward, 1992).

## More To Know: Tackling Complex Text

Hiebert (2012) lists a set of teaching actions to help students engage with complex text and glean the support they need to develop as more capable readers in control of even domain-specific, challenging text. These teaching actions include:

- » Consistent opportunities with texts that support capacity with core vocabulary.
- » Direct instruction that extends vocabularies in informational and narrative texts.
- » Opportunities to increase reading stamina.
- » Support in developing funds of knowledge (the background knowledge necessary to comprehend the textual content).

Students' ability to handle complex text doesn't necessarily develop in a linear fashion. For example, if our students are deeply interested in humpback whales, their interest may sustain them in a text on that topic that otherwise would be too challenging. In general, teachers will want to look for ways to stretch students' experience across a range of texts, keeping in mind their students' motivation, knowledge and prior reading.

### Comprehension and the Close Read

To help students build reading capacity with increasingly complex text, students must engage in a close read of challenging literary and informational text every day (Robb, 2013) and aim to accomplish the corresponding dual goals as explained by literacy researcher Dr. Elfrieda Hiebert (2011):

- » Undertake the close, attentive reading that lies at the heart of understanding and enjoying complex works of literature.
- » Perform the critical reading necessary to analyze the staggering amount of information available digitally and in print.

### Closing Thoughts

Although experienced teachers have long engaged their students in a close reading of text, the new vigorous ELA standards take close reading to a whole new level, maintaining that reading requires "close scrutiny" of the text through reading and rereading. Teachers are encouraged to guide lessons with a high percentage of text-dependent questions that require students to use the author's words and evidence drawn directly from the text to support their responses. Students are invited to meld the structure of a work with its meaning, while also paying special attention to the unique features of each text, including, in the case of nonfiction, such structural elements as headings, sidebars, graphics, captions and quick-read essential facts (Lehmann & Roberts, 2013; Robb, 2013).

Given the emphasis on close reading and rereading, many teachers are introducing short text into the reading menu. Shorter, challenging texts that elicit close reading and re-reading draw students from varying ability levels together in a close analysis of more demanding text. In this way, students can read and re-read deliberately while they probe and ponder the meanings of individual words, the order in which sentences unfold, and the development of ideas over the

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## Nonfiction

“I was absolutely gobsmacked. In Volume 1 (A to Anno) alone, I could learn about abbeys, aerial navigation, Africa and angling.”

– Elfrieda (Freddy) Hiebert

## Key Findings

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- » The quality of nonfiction in recent years has increased tenfold. Gone are the dry encyclopedic texts of yesteryear – now our students can feast on beautifully written, full-of-voice books replete with stunning illustrations and intriguing graphics.
- » And nonfiction texts – all informational because they impart facts – serve innumerable functions, come in dozens and dozens of genres and formats, and reflect a dazzling array of structural patterns and design features (Duke, 2012).
- » Not surprisingly, many students prefer to read informational text. This may be truer than ever, given its abundance, particularly in a digital format, and may also be especially true for boys (Allyn, 2011). As middle school English/language arts teacher Joelle Brummitt-Yale (2008) notes:
  - “While boys generally perform lower than girls on reading assessments, there is one area in which they actually ‘outscore’ the girls. Boys’ scores on sections of tests featuring informational texts are often higher than those of their female counterparts. This seems to indicate that informational texts are the boys’ forte. Teachers and parents should provide boys with informational texts to read and learn from. These can include magazine and newspaper articles, nonfiction books about topics boys are interested in (like hobbies or sports) and instructional manuals. ... Offering these texts to boys as instructional tools or for pleasure reading will increase their interest in reading.”

And challenged readers and English Language Learners may prefer and benefit from informational text in ways not possible with fiction. Vulnerable readers or new-to-English readers are often challenged by limited English vocabularies, which then, in turn, make processing complex fictional narratives difficult. An infusion of informational text – particularly about topics that stoke students’ interest – may be the easiest way to build their conceptual knowledge and vocabulary base, essential for comprehension in general (Duke & Carlisle, 2011). What’s more, informational text features such as headers, labels, sidebars and diagrams scaffold readers, enabling them to more easily navigate the text and access the content.

Indeed, as Fountas and Pinnell (2012) explain, all readers need the reading workout that nonfiction offers:

“As students process nonfiction texts, they learn to adjust their reading according to the purpose, style and type of text. This flexibility expands their reading ability. Complex nonfiction texts present a challenge to students partly because of their great variety and also because of the many ways writers can craft texts to provide information. It takes many years for readers to become skilled in reading the various genres and types of nonfiction texts.”

In general, for all students, reading lots of nonfiction – and learning to navigate different informational text types and formats – is the best way to learn how to access, use and apply nonfiction genres. Furthermore, nonfiction may be our best and most efficient way to build “world knowledge and an extensive vocabulary.” Informational text is written, “to convey key facts about the natural and social world” (Duke & Carlisle, 2011). To that end, it often reflects a highly specialized, domain-specific vocabulary – helping teens develop a robust vocabulary and wide-ranging conceptual knowledge (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Because nonfiction text can be literary, too, it also provides our young teens with superb models of exquisite language. For example, nonfiction writers may “employ many of the techniques of the writer’s craft: figurative language, lyrical description, unique or surprising comparisons, and interesting ways of organizing and presenting information” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Finally, Duke (2013) reminds us that to do the “hard cognitive work of informational text,” students need “compelling purposes and contexts for informational reading and writing.”

## Importance of Information Text in Primary Classrooms

Adapted from Nell Duke’s Reading and Writing in the Primary Grades:

Informational text – defined by literacy researcher Nell Duke (2012) as text that conveys information about the natural or social world and features particular linguistic components to accomplish that purpose – may well be the key to academic success. Children who become familiar with informational text at an early age are more likely to demonstrate stronger academic success in fourth grade and beyond when they begin to encounter textbooks and other informational texts (Chall, 1983). And, to this end, The Common Core Standards (2010) now require that students engage with informational text 50 percent of the time in elementary school, increasing to 60 percent in middle school, and increasing again to

70 percent in high school. More than ever, since our lives are informed, shaped and even driven by informational text, it seems wise to introduce children to info text from the very beginning of their schooling career.

» **Informational Text is Ubiquitous in American Society**

Indeed, 96 percent of the text on the Web is informational (Kamil & Land, 1998), and adults tend to focus on expository text (Venezky, 1982, Smith, 2000). Given our increasingly information-oriented economy, the emphasis on informational text is only likely to increase. As we work to prepare our students for the world beyond school, we need to consider how best to help them read and write informational text right from the beginning.

» **Informational Text Differs in Profound Ways from Fictional Narrative – Structurally, Linguistically and Graphically**

In fact, the ways in which we navigate informational text, which is often non-continuous (think of schedules and maps), requires experience and skill (Duke & Kays, 1998; Pappas, 2006; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007; Fountas and Pinnell, 2012). You can help children learn their way around informational text by using the same instructional structures that you use for the interactive read-aloud, book clubs and everyday literacy.

» **Informational Text Builds Vocabulary and Other Kinds of Literary Knowledge**

The vocabulary found in informational text differs significantly from that typically found in narrative, and – because it may be technical since it is related to the content of informational text – it may be unfamiliar to children (Duke & Kays, 1998; Hiebert, 2006; Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Because vocabulary and reading comprehension are strongly related (Bauman, 2009), children benefit from the exposure to the language of info text. For this reason, “Informational text may be particularly well-suited to building children’s word knowledge.”

» **Informational Text Builds Wide-ranging Knowledge of the World**

Children also benefit from the wide-ranging world knowledge that informational text provides. Comprehension is strongly influenced by what one knows (Duke and Pearson, 2002); thus, proficient readers tend to have more expansive world knowledge. Again, we see the benefits of introducing even young children to content-rich informational text (Duke & Carlisle, 2011).

» **Informational Text is Preferred Reading Material for Many Children**

Jobe and Dayton-Sakari (2002) coined the term “Info-Kids” to describe those kids who prefer info text to fictional. Including more informational text in classrooms may improve attitudes toward reading and even serve as a catalyst for overall literacy development. When the text’s topic is of particular interest to a child, his or her reading is likely to improve. Not surprisingly, then, approaches that emphasize reading for the purpose of addressing real questions that children have about their world tend to lead to higher achievement and motivation (Guthrie, 2008). Including more informational text in the primary classrooms may help us address the interests and questions of more of our students.

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## Fiction

“Great stories are not only measured by how compelling the characters or dilemmas are; the true test is how they help us understand our deepest selves and our relationship to the world and others around us.”

– Farin Houk,  
Founder and Head of Seattle Amistand School

## Key Findings

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- » Stories help [students] make connections to both unique and shared experiences and to other points of view (Gallagher, 2014; Toma, 2014).
- » Fiction makes us more empathic human beings (Djikic, Oatley, and Modovenanu, 2013).
- » “Reading literary fiction may hone adults’ ToM (Theory of Mind), a complex and social capacity” (Kidd & Castano, 2012).
- » “Fiction opens our minds to the creative process, enhances our vocabulary, influences our emotions and strengthens our cognitive functions” (Toma, 2014).
- » Fiction helps us discover ourselves – and, simultaneously, outgrow ourselves (Burke, 2014).
- » For many, fiction is the gateway to proficient reading because it’s fiction, so often, that encourages avid, voluminous reading (Gaiman, 2013).

## More to Know: Fiction Lets Us *Be* More

Kylene Beers notes that while nonfiction helps us learn more, fiction lets us *be* more. Author Neil Gaimen (2013) suggests two profound reasons this might be so. First, for many readers, **fiction is the doorway to proficient reading:**

“The drive to know what happens next, to want to turn the page, the need to keep going, even if it’s hard, because someone’s in trouble, and you have to know how it’s all going to end ... that’s a very real drive. And it forces you to learn new words, to think new thoughts, to keep going. To discover that reading per se is pleasurable. Once you learn that, you’re on the road to reading everything.”

**And we know that avid, voluminous readers possess a deep knowledge of the world as they encounter – through their wide reading – events, people and issues well beyond the narrow confines of their own lived experience.**

Second, fiction develops empathy – and there’s research to prove it. Djikic, Oatley and Moldoveanu (2013) found that their research participants, who were frequent fiction readers, had higher scores on a measure of empathy. The results suggest “a role for fictional literature in facilitating development of empathy.” Again, Gaimen weighs in:

“Prose fiction is something you build up from 26 letters and a handful of punctuation marks, and you ... using your imagination, create a world and people in it and look out through other eyes. You get to feel things, visit places and worlds you would never otherwise know. You learn that everyone else out there is a me, as well. You’re being someone else, and when you return to your own world, you’re going to be slightly changed. ... You’re also finding out something as you read vitally important for making your way in the world. And it’s this: The world doesn’t have to be like this. Things can be different.”

Indeed, **the key point is that we can be different; fiction moves us to change** – not just to have a more expansive understanding of the world – and of personal reality. Who would have thought brain scans and fiction could work together to tell a story, but that’s just what cognitive scientist Keith Oatley’s research has done. He explains:

“Brain scans are revealing what happens in our heads when we read a detailed description, an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters. Stories ... stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life.”

That’s because our brains are, in a sense, fooled – they aren’t able to differentiate between the fictional experience and the real life event. What’s more, **the social experiences we encounter through a character’s point of view help ready us for social interactions with the real people in our lives:**

“Fiction is particularly useful simulation because negotiating the social world effectively is extremely tricky, requiring us to weigh up myriad interacting instances of cause and effect. Just as computer simulations can help us get to grips with complex problems such as flying a plane or forecasting the weather, so novels, stories and dramas can help us

understand the complexities of social life (Oatley, 2014).”

## What About Literary/Textual Analysis?

Our more rigorous reading standards maintain that the deep work of reading should include textual analysis, a method of criticism that analyzes the details of text in order to reveal its structure and meaning. In fiction, we examine literary elements such as plot, setting, character, theme and figurative language to dig deeper into our interpretation of the text. In nonfiction, we investigate domain-specific vocabulary and text features, such as photographs and illustrations, graphs, maps, sidebars, inset boxes, timelines and captions. Textual/literary analysis enhances our students’ appreciation and enjoyment of reading, but it also promotes the high-level, critical comprehension that is essential across all aspects of life and career – it’s an essential workout for learning how to think.

Literature expert Dr. Glenna Sloan (2003) explains the central role of fictional literature – and literary analysis – in our lives:

“The aim of the study of literature is not to develop professional reviewers, scholars or researchers. The aim is more fully developed human beings. Genuine criticism is a systematic study that treats literature as an art. It involves talking about literature in a way that will build up a systematic structure of knowledge of literature, taking the student beyond the subjectivity of his experience out into a wider, more comprehensive world.”

Knowing how to enter and navigate this wider, more comprehensive world requires skill, discipline and hard work; it means close reading and rereading, taking notes and asking questions. It also means understanding the structure of fiction and nonfiction, how the two text types work – plus learning to understand and use the language of textual analysis. Such explicit analysis is demanding work. However, it’s also exhilarating as children learn to dig deep into a text and consider why and how an author has chosen specific words, stretched sentences and syntax just so, presented information in a particular graphic format, and released characters into unique settings and circumstances to create a world on a page that elicits a particular response in each reader.

Students learn how to analyze increasingly complex text across the spectrum of literary and textual elements with thoughtful teacher support and precise instruction delivered at the point of need. As Carol Jago reminds us, if we want our students to have the stamina to read complex texts and achieve the high-level quality comprehension, we need to help our students “increase their capacity to concentrate and contemplate” (2011). To that end, having access to the tools of textual analysis – and whole text, both fiction and nonfiction – is an essential first step (Seravallo, 2012; 2013).

## Closing Thoughts

Kidd & Comer (2013) note the role of fiction to “promote social welfare,” such as developing empathy in doctors and life skills in prisoners. Fiction has been, of course, the mainstay of secondary English coursework. For this reason, some question the push-away from fiction to embrace as much as 70 percent nonfiction in high school. Kidd & Comer end with this challenge:

“Debates over the social value of types of fiction and the arts more broadly are important, and it seems critical to supplement them with empirical research. These results show that reading literary fiction may hone adults’ ToM [Theory of the Mind], a complex and critical social capacity.”

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# TEACHING

“The central and most important goal of reading instruction is to foster a love of reading.”

– Dr. Linda Gambrell, Distinguished Professor of Education,  
Clemson University

- » Interactive Read-Aloud
- » Guided Reading
- » Text Sets
- » Facilitated Book Clubs
- » Reading and Writing Connections

# Interactive Read-Aloud

“If we wish to help children and adolescents become thoughtfully literate, classroom talk around texts is critical.”

– Dr. Richard Allington, University of Tennessee

## Key Findings

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- » Just as the name suggests, the read-aloud is truly *interactive*. As teachers or parents read aloud to children, they stop only briefly and just a few times so as not to lose the momentum of the story. At the same time, teachers and parents invite children to participate: make comments, extend the ideas of the author, ask and respond to questions. In this way, children build more intricate networks of meaning than they could have accomplished on their own (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).
- » Researchers maintain that the most valuable aspect of the read-aloud is the experience it gives young children with decontextualized language, requiring them to make sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now (Beck & McKeown, 2001).
- » The interactive read-aloud results in student gains in vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001), comprehension strategies and story schema (Pinnell & Fountas, 2011; Lever, R., & Sénéchal, M. 2011), and concept development (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses, 2005).
- » Simply inviting children to talk during interactive read-alouds doesn't provide the needed learning boost. It's the close reading – and deep, intentional conversation about the text – that makes the difference (Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses, 2005; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).

## More to Know: The Learning Potential of the Interactive Read-aloud

Wasik and Bond (2001) investigated the learning potential of the interactive read-aloud. Their study, which included 121 four-year-old children from low-income families (94 percent of whom were African-American), engaged the treatment group in interactive book reading and book reading extension activities. **The interactive read-aloud included defining vocabulary words, providing opportunities for children to use words from the books, asking open-ended questions, and giving children the chance to talk and be heard.**

Children enter school able to think and reason about the world in situations that make sense to them. In school, however, they learn to think and reason in “disembedded contexts” – to use symbols systems and deal with representations of the world. Control teachers received all the books that treatment teachers did. These books were read as often in control classrooms as they were in treatment classrooms; however, control teachers did not receive the interactive read-aloud training that treatment teachers did.

For the first four weeks of the intervention, an experienced teacher modeled the shared book reading techniques in each treatment classroom and assisted with reading extension activities. For the next 11 weeks, treatment teachers ran the program on their own. At post-test, treatment classes scored significantly higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary than control classes did. Treatment classes also scored significantly higher on their knowledge of target vocabulary words. Classroom observations found that teachers in the treatment group were significantly and substantially more likely than control teachers to use the target words during related activities.

### The Power of Talk

**Just at the name suggests, the read-aloud is truly interactive; as you read aloud to your students, you invite them to participate, make comments, extend the ideas of their peers, evaluate the author’s point of view, and ask and respond to questions.** In ways that are akin to an orchestra conductor, you help orchestrate the conversation, which may include asking your students to **“turn & talk” with a neighbor** about their thinking (Hoyt, 2007). Through your own modeling and the opportunities to participate with safe, scaffolded support, **students quickly learn how to comment, critique and claim their own thoughts beyond the usual “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it.”** In this way, the teacher helps children build a more intricate network of meaning than they could have accomplished on their own (Hoyt, 2007; Laminack and Wadsworth, 2006; Whitehurst, et al., 1992; Purcell-Gates, McIntyre and Freppon, 1995).

**During an interactive read-aloud, students learn how to:**

- » Focus on the text.
- » Use suitable words when talking about a text.
- » Listen actively and respect others’ ideas.
- » Build on others’ comments.
- » Back up their opinions with evidence from the text.

Through active participation, students learn that they are expected to respond to one another’s



comments; indeed, the expectation is clear: every one participates.

## The Research Behind the Interactive Read-Aloud

Known as dialogic or interactive, these read-alouds result in student gains in vocabulary (Bennett-Armistead, 2007), comprehension strategies and story schema (Van den Broek, 2001), and concept development (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Fountas and Pinnell, 2012). However, simply inviting children to talk during interactive read-alouds doesn't provide the needed learning boost. It's the close reading and textual analysis – deep, intentional conversation about the text (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, 2012;; and Shanahan, 2012) – that makes the difference. Shanahan explains:

“Close reading requires a substantial emphasis on readers figuring out a high quality text. This ‘figuring out’ is accomplished primarily by reading and discussing the text ... close reading [means] intense emphasis on text, figuring out the text by thinking about the words and ideas in the text, minimization of external explanations, multiple and dynamic rereading, multiple purposes that focus on what a text says, how it says it, and what it means or what its value is.”

These are the textual investigations in which students engage as they use the Fountas and Pinnell (2006) framework for thinking about text: thinking within the text, beyond the text and about the text.

## The Interactive Read-Aloud: Vital Support for Middle School Students

While the interactive read-aloud is widely regarded as an ideal instructional strategy for younger children, it offers vital, indispensable support for readers of all ages – including secondary students. Maureen McLaughlin, President of the International Reading Association (2013-14), writes:

“As teachers, we can read-aloud to students beginning in the early grades and continuing right through high school and on to the university level. Interactive read-alouds and related discussions engage students, increase understanding and stimulate higher-order thinking (2013).”

Literacy educators Frank Serafini and Cyndi Giorgis, authors of *Reading Aloud and Beyond: Fostering the Intellectual Life of Older Readers* (2003) also champion the read-aloud for middle schoolers. They note that the read-aloud supports both reading and writing development and fosters a love of reading. They write: “Reading aloud is just as important for older readers as it is for younger ones and should occur every day, into the intermediate-grade classrooms and beyond.”

Middle school teacher Jamie Marsh (2007) agrees:

“Reading aloud should never end in elementary school. Reading gets more complex as students move up through the grades and the expectations we have of them as readers continue to grow. This is important teaching – modeling what good readers do naturally, then sending students out to read with those models fresh in their minds. It builds the enthusiasm for reading and the skills and strategies needed to become readers who get

lost in a book.”

## Short and Extended Text

And while we may be more familiar with reading aloud chapter books with older students, Fountas and Pinnell (2012) remind us of the power of short text, including picture books, for readers of all ages:

“We advocate using beautiful, content-rich, age-and grade-appropriate picture books – short stories or poetry or short informational pieces illustrated with beautiful art – as a foundation for thinking, talking and writing.”

Secondary teacher Penny Kittle depends on both read-alouds and book talks – often with short text – as the best way to lure her students into reading and convince them to become readers with their own rich and fulfilling reading lives. What’s more, in her tribute to the joy of reading – *Book Love: Developing Depth, Stamina and Passion in Adolescent Readers* (2013) – she reminds us that “reading aloud is the most important foundation in teaching writing.” She frequently reads aloud poetry and other short text as a way to help her students learn to crack open and analyze a text with their own writing in mind.

## Closing Thoughts

The interactive read-aloud is multifaceted. It lends itself to both extended chapter books as well as short text such as poetry, magazine articles and short stories – and it offers a range of benefits to young adolescents, who tend to be intensely social with divergent learning styles and a growing need for autonomy. The wondrous interactive read-aloud accomplishes multiple, essential instructional goals simultaneously, including:

- » Drawing *all* students into the text.
- » Capturing the interest of disengaged readers.
- » Expanding students’ reading horizons by exposing them to new books, authors and genres.
- » Furnishing background information.
- » Refining students’ understanding of *text* – genre, format, literary elements, text structures and features.
- » Promoting inquiry.
- » Teaching essential strategic reading actions.
- » Encouraging students to view topics from multiple perspectives.
- » Improving listening comprehension.
- » Building academic vocabulary.
- » Deepening comprehension.
- » Modeling all aspects of thinking, talking and writing about reading.
- » Demonstrating fluent reading.
- » Building an intellectual classroom community of readers.

- » Introducing and modeling collaborative conversations.
- » Addressing the requirements of the Common Core State Standards.
- » Fostering a lifelong love of reading.

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## Guided Reading

“The aim of guided reading is to develop independent readers who question, consider alternatives and make informed choices as they seek meaning.”

– Dr. Margaret Mooney, Literacy Educator and Author

## Key Findings

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- » Guided reading places students on an accelerated course to independent reading with accuracy, fluency and comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; 2011; Richardson, 2009).
- » Guided reading is potent, strategic and differentiated small-group reading instruction, and its aim is clear: to help readers process – accurately, proficiently and independently – increasingly challenging, conceptually rich, complex texts on grade level (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Richardson, 2009)
- » Based on forty years of irrefutable research, drawing from cognitive science and the linguistic principles that inform our understanding of language and literacy development (Clay, 1976; 2001; Holdaway, 1979; Mooney, 1990; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001; 2006; 2010, 2011; Johnston, 2010; Allington, 2012), guided reading supports *all* readers: challenged, gifted and those for whom English is a target language (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

## More to Know: **Guided Reading Creates Confident Independent Readers**

Guided reading is smart, differentiated reading instruction that centers on a close read of text, literary conversation, and, at times, writing about the reading – which aligns with higher standards call for integrated language arts. This approach is a fast track to successful, independent grade-level reading and an indispensable first step in helping students achieve the primary objective of new rigorous reading standards. By the time students graduate from high school, they “must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers” (Common Core, 2010).

Guided reading teachers are well on their way to helping students accomplish this essential goal. Based on forty years of irrefutable research, drawing from cognitive science and the linguistic principles that inform our understanding of language and literacy development (Clay, 1976; 2001; Holdaway, 1979; Mooney, 1990; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, 2001; 2006; 2010, 2011; Johnston, 2010; Allington, 2012), **guided reading supports all readers: challenged, gifted and those for whom English is a target language.**

**The basic tenets of guided reading are straightforward:**

- » Students learn to read by reading.
- » The role of text is pivotal.
- » Students engage in close reading and, as needed, reread to check up on meaning and search for text-based evidence.
- » Reading accuracy, fluency and academic vocabulary reflect proficient reading.
- » The teacher is a *responsive instructor*, in sync with each student’s instructional trajectory.
- » The teacher knows when to step back and remove instructional scaffolds, enabling the student to take off on her own as an independent reader.

Anita Haquinata describes guided reading as one of the “most important contemporary reading instructional practices in the United States” (in Fawson & Reutzel, 2000). Simply stated, **guided reading has propelled hundreds of thousands of children into proficient independent reading.**

### Teaching with a Sense of Urgency

As many as one in three children find learning to read challenging (Adams, 1990). This makes guided reading’s goal – to help all readers achieve grade level independent reading – all the more urgent and essential. Typically, the children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely succeed in catching up. Read the research; on this point, it’s both extensive and unequivocal (Lentz, 1998; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgensen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). As Juel first noted in 1988, **a child who struggles to read in the first grade is 88 percent more likely to struggle in the fourth grade as well. Clearly, the early prevention of reading difficulties is critical** (Clay, 1993; Pinnell, 1989; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011, Slavin, Madden, Dolan, & Wasik, 1996) and, to that end, there is no more effective way to prevent falling behind than guided reading. All students – those who are challenged, those who thrive as capable

readers and those for whom English is a target language – benefit from guided reading’s unique double scaffolding: 1. scaffolded text and 2. scaffolded instruction. Indeed, **guided reading offers the surest route to critical thinking; deep comprehension; and confident, capable independent reading.**

## The Research That Undergirds Guided Reading

The remarkable effectiveness of guided reading is documented by forty years of convincing, multi-faceted research across instructional settings, demographics, instructional needs and methodologies (Johnston, 2011). In 2007, Reading Recovery, from which guided reading evolved, was featured in the Institute of Education Sciences’ What Works Clearinghouse, as the one reading intervention that actually works:

“A long-awaited independent review of research in beginning reading programs revealed that just one program, Reading Recovery, has positive effects or potentially positive effects across all four domains studied:

- » Alphabets (phonemic awareness, print awareness, letter knowledge and phonics).
- » Fluency.
- » Comprehension.
- » General reading achievement.”

Evaluation data on more than 100,000 children each year demonstrate the remarkably consistent results achieved in thousands of American schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2007).

### Close Reading and Text-Based Evidence

Reading comprehension is complex and can be taught only through the effective processing – with deep thinking – of connected and coherent texts. The RAND definition of reading helps frame the work of guided reading:

**“Reading comprehension [is] the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. It consists of three elements: the reader, the text and the activity or purpose for reading (Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension, RAND Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 11).”**

**Reading is an active, complex and multidimensional process that serves many different purposes. The reader is a problem solver, solving new words and navigating literary elements in fiction and text structures in informational text, while constantly monitoring his hold on meaning. The moment meaning slips away, a red flag should go up, and the reader should stop and rethink until he’s reassured he’s back on the meaning track, using the text as his comprehension anchor. If his dip back into the text doesn’t yield meaningful language and understanding, he needs to revisit again and again until it does.**



## An Exemplary Teaching-Assessing Loop

Intentional and intensive instruction, informed by continuous formative assessment, characterizes the daily routine of the thoughtful guided reading teacher. She continuously monitors her students' progress: Are they mastering the foundational skills of reading? Are they learning to control the powerful linguistic and cognitive strategies that enable mature, skillful, independent reading? Teachers recognize that intellectual and academic growth occur across time, developmental benchmarks and disciplines. But working with finely honed instruction and expertly scaffolded text gives them the best shot at maximizing the instructional leverage of each text.

### Closing Thoughts

Guided reading is not an exercise to practice reading skills. It is research-based, professionally energized, highly targeted, scaffolded reading instruction that propels all students toward confident, independent reading. It's our best guarantee that our students will hit their reading stride and devour loads of diverse, high quality grade-level literature and informational texts – on their way to creating a rich, literate lives for themselves. Reading well means reading always with deep, refined comprehension. We want our students to gain maximum insight, knowledge and enjoyment from every text they read; nothing less will do.

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## Text Sets

“Text sets are a tool for creating a lifelong habit of mind.”

– Maria Nichols,

Director of School Innovation, San Diego Unified School District

## Key Findings

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- » Text sets are an instructional technique that’s simple to implement and almost unfailingly effective – fulfilling many of the instructional shifts called for by rigorous reading standards, including increasing practice with nonfiction reading, engaging in close reading, accessing domain-specific vocabulary, and answering text-dependent questions with text-based evidence.
- » “Text sets are a collection of sources of information that have a commonality; that is, they explore a shared topic, issue or big idea.” Text sets invite children to explore, discuss and pursue additional questions (2009).
- » Additionally, according to Neuman & Roskos (2012), “Text sets need to be coherent – narrowly focused on a set of key ideas to ensure that children will have repeated opportunities to hear and develop an understanding of a common set of words and concepts throughout the readings.”
- » Students are on their way to becoming critically aware, insightful learners and thinkers as they wrestle with different concepts, ideas, perspectives and opinions across a range of text and learn to construct their own beliefs drawing from multiple sources of information – as opposed to simply believing a single source. (Robb, 2003).

## More to Know: Intertextual Connections

The relation each text has to the texts surrounding it is often known as intertextuality. Readers build understanding as they draw information from a range of texts. Reading multiple texts across the same theme automatically fosters close reading and deepens and refines subject knowledge. As noted by renowned literacy researcher Peter Johnston: “To understand a text deeply, we need multiple perspectives. To understand a subject, idea or concept more deeply, we need multiple texts because each text offers another author’s perspective on the subject” (2009).

As readers finish one book in the set, they are better prepared for reading and understanding the next book in the set – and so on. Each book builds on the last. Plus, when students read across a set of related books, they inevitably notice the similarities and differences in how texts are crafted. Subtle differences across texts that might have escaped a student’s notice if he or she approached each book as a singular read – including text structure and features, vocabulary and presentational formats – come into sharp focus as students concentrate on reading and discussing a set of related texts (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006).

### What Text Sets Help Students Accomplish

Our students thrive when they read a diverse range of classic and contemporary literature, as well as engaging nonfiction on a range of topics. In this way they build knowledge, gain insights, explore possibilities and broaden their understanding.

### Learn Critical Content

Extensive nonfiction reading may well be the key to success in later schooling. As they advance in grade, readers more frequently face content-area textbooks as well as informational passages on tests. Including more informational text in early schooling prepares them for these reading and writing demands. Students who know something about topics they meet in different academic subjects bring a great advantage to their reading and writing. The more specialized academic knowledge they have, the easier it is to comprehend and convey new information when they read and write (Hampton & Resnick, 2008).

Furthermore, “students are expected to learn from increasingly technical expository texts during adolescence, and their knowledge base must continue to grow in order to meet the demands of this text ... students who do not keep pace with the increasing demands content area texts place on prior knowledge will fall further and further behind in their ability to construct the meaning of the text” (Torgesen et al., 2007). Text sets, related by theme, provide unique conceptual and linguistic support and enable even challenged readers to access critical content.

### Build Academic and Domain-Specific Vocabulary to Access Content

“Domain-specific academic vocabulary consists of relatively low-frequency, content-specific words that appear in textbooks and other instructional materials; for example, *apex* in math, *escarpment* in geography, and *isobar* in science” (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2011). Knowing that a robust vocabulary predicts reading comprehension, it is essential that we do all that we can to help our students grow their understanding of vocabulary related to specific domains of content; indeed, as children’s vocabulary grows, it bolsters their reading comprehension (Duke & Carlisle,

2011). Duke cites the high correlation (0.86) between academic vocabulary and comprehension and offers several strategies that students can use again and again to lock down the meaning of more sophisticated content words, including relating words to themes and to other similar words. These word associations help build networks of meaning that support reading comprehension. Of course, within thematic text sets, vocabulary is automatically related. Students encounter the same set of thematically related words across each text set, enabling them to more easily absorb and assimilate the new words.

Biemiller (2006) has demonstrated that while students certainly benefit from hearing engaging read-alouds, the learning potency of the experience dramatically increases when teachers also provide explicit explanations of the words. It's this combination – word explanations plus read-alouds of a theme-based text set collection – that leads to the greatest vocabulary growth. Learning begets more learning of increasingly sophisticated conceptual understandings and word knowledge. “Vocabulary development for these words occurs most effectively through a coherent course of study in which subject matters are integrated and coordinated across the curriculum, and domains become familiar to the students over several days or weeks” (CCSS, 2010).

### Gain Strategies, Such as Close Reading, for Approaching Complex Text

To grow and achieve the goals of rigorous reading standards, our students must read extensively and intensively – especially informational texts that offer them new language, new knowledge and new modes of thought. *Close reading* – which text sets promote – is a key strategy. Timothy Shanahan explains close reading:

“Close reading requires a substantial emphasis on readers figuring out a high quality text. This ‘figuring out’ is accomplished primarily by reading and discussing the text ... Close reading [means] intense emphasis on text, figuring out the text by thinking about the words and ideas in the text, minimization of external explanations, multiple and dynamic re-readings, multiple purposes that focus on what a text says, how it says it and what it means or what its value is (2012).”

A close reading is also a careful and purposeful rereading of a text. It's an encounter with the text where students are able to focus on what the author had to say, what the author's purpose was, what the words mean, and what the structure of the text tells them. We provide text-dependent questions, which require our students to return to the text and search for answers. These aren't the old-fashioned recall questions in which students simply search for the facts. These are questions that prompt students to consider the text and the author's purpose, as well as the structure, graphics and flow of the text (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012; Lehman, 2013; Robb, 2013).

### Closing Thoughts

Carol Jago (2011) reminds us that “curriculum should be aimed at what Lev Vygotsky calls students' zone of proximal development.” Vygotsky (1979) wrote, “The only good kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it.” Classroom texts should “pose intellectual challenges for readers and invite them to stretch and grow. ... Reading a broad range of books makes students stronger readers and, over time, stronger people.”

Rich and thought-provoking thematically related text sets that stimulate student interest and motivation help students become both stronger readers and stronger learners. As they engage in a close read across related text, students build their skill as proficient readers – and acquire fascinating information about the world around them (Cappiello & Dawes, 2013). Plus, when texts offer a wide range of points of view, students are forced to grapple with possible conflicting and questionable information – exactly the kind of deep critical thinking encouraged by the CCSS.

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## Book Clubs

“Children’s ability to use language as a tool for thinking on their own has its origins in thinking together.”

– Dr. Peter Johnston, Professor Emeritus,  
University at Albany, State University of New York

## Key Findings

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- » Unique teaching and learning potency arises from a magical alchemy of conversation about books – or shared *text talk* – as students and teachers come together in collaborative, heterogeneously-grouped book clubs to discuss and engage with the books on multiple levels (Serafini, 2011).
- » Through reflective, academic conversation about books, teachers and students create the vibrant, literate classroom community that best supports high-level, quality comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).
- » The collaborative, interactive nature of the club enables *all* students – including struggling readers and English Language Learners – to find the support they need to fully engage with the books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).
- » Each club member gains access to more expansive, deeper comprehension as he or she participates in an intricate network of meaning-construction through shared talk about books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

## More to Know: A Grand Conversation

An easy way to understand the lively, shared conversation we want to promote in a student book club is to consider the rush of conversation that often follows an intense or provocative film you see with friends. As you walk from the movie theater, each of you noting the film's memorable moments, you are collectively swept up in the thrill of intellectual analysis – connecting your experience with the film to other films you may have seen; analyzing the film's deeper meaning; expressing new insights; and, all the while, energetically building on, extending and refining each other's thoughts as you cite moments from the film as evidence for your ideas. The invigorating conversation feels urgent and profound as you craft together an understanding of the experience you just shared in the darkened theater: **What did it mean? How might it forever change your understanding of the world?**

This after-the-movie “grand conversation” (Eeds and Peterson, 2007) mirrors what we want to happen in our book clubs, also known as literature study, literature circles or literature discussion groups. We think of the book club as a literature “investigation,” where participants “try out tentative ideas, search for information to confirm or refute their thinking, and build on one another's ideas” (p.280).

And just as in the grand conversations we share after a terrific movie, there's no one right answer in a book club. Students participating in book clubs enjoy wide-ranging conversation (although the talk is always focused on and grounded in the text) and ask questions of each other, as they probe deeper or work to clarify shared ideas and thoughts about the text.

Unlike the “comprehension check” in old basal reading groups where the teacher asks a series of questions each linked to one right answer to ascertain whether her students understood the text, all participants in a book club, including the teacher, ask authentic questions of each other as they work to understand one another's response to the book. The questions they ask are genuine attempts to build meaning and not intended to check up on comprehension. As Eeds and Peterson remind us (2007), it's the difference between a “gentle inquisition” and a “grand conversation.” **We want our students to enjoy a grand conversation about every book they read, and as we listen in on their lively book talk, we quite easily learn what they understood about the book and where they might need instructional support.**

### The Teacher's Role

Your role in a book club is key. You demonstrate the stance and language of literary analysis. What does it look like and sound like to engage in an analytical discussion about a book, fiction or nonfiction? What language do you use? How do you draw on evidence from the book to support your position? Students will learn as you prompt and model, not only in their book clubs, but also throughout the day, as you create a rich analytical classroom culture and model during your interactive read-aloud and in your guided reading groups. You'll demonstrate the components of literary analysis: plot, characters, setting, theme, style and language, mood, point of view, illustrations and symbols, as well as the features of nonfiction analysis such as organization, style, tone, illustrations/graphics, accuracy and mood. What do you notice about the language the author uses, the perspectives he or she assumes? You prompt, model and continually monitor the discussion. What do your students understand? Where do they need more support?



## Choosing the Right Books

Choosing the right book is pivotal; indeed, as we've noted: "Book clubs that engage students in inquiry start with a good book selection" (2006; p. 294). *Comprehension Clubs* brings together books that are developmentally appropriate for your students, as well as books that students love to read. Additionally, books that are substantive and reflect layers of meaning thus will provoke talk.

Again, you need not feel bound by the ways in which the books are grouped. While the *Comprehension Club* collection comes organized as "text sets" around themes, topics and genres, educators might also enjoy organizing the books somewhat differently to meet the specific needs and interests of your own students – or connect the *Comprehension Club* collection to other books that you already have in your classroom library. In this way, students might read a different book in the text set and then, when they gather in their book club to discuss, they can build connections within in the text set as they compare and contrast the individual titles.

Educators can create a text set drawing from a wide range of criteria:

- » Author study exploring multiple titles all written by the same author.
- » Genre study reading across a particular genre such as mystery, biography or historical fiction.
- » Characters investigating similar characters across books such as a strong female protagonist.
- » Text structure analyzing similar literary elements such as flashbacks or stories within stories.

## Middle School and Book Clubs: A Perfect Match

Early adolescence and the shift to middle school represent a significant milestone for most students. In addition to encountering more demanding literacy challenges across the disciplines, middle school students experience a complex relationship with reading and writing, as they wrestle with their own self-identity. Adolescents crave social connection and autonomy; book clubs – framed around independent reading, small group decision-making and collaborative conversations – are uniquely suited to address both needs.

- » Book clubs foster student choice and provide middle schoolers with lots of opportunities to make decisions, take responsibility for reading their books on time and come to the book club prepared to talk about text, bolstering self-confidence, sparking engagement and building community around books (Haas, 2013; Guthrie, 2008).
- » Engagement is the life force of adolescent literacy learning. Adolescents who see value in school reading, read and enjoy academic success. And those who don't, don't read and typically fall behind. Reading disengagement is more often than not the root cause of school failure and dropouts (Guthrie, 2008).
- » Book clubs help young teens discover themselves as readers with unique reading preferences and needs. Middle schoolers "refine their reading preferences, become sophisticated readers of informational text and lay the groundwork for a lifelong reading habit. They begin to use reading to help answer profound questions about themselves and the world. With good instruction, ample time and opportunity to

read a variety of texts, young adolescents can become successful readers both in and out of school.” (IRA, 2013).

- » Book clubs offer young adolescents, known for their divergent learning styles, extended learning opportunities to shape and share their learning in unique and creative ways. Tweens can draw from the language arts (oral and written presentations), technology and the visual and dramatic arts (Wilhelm, 2012).

## Closing Thoughts

The great joy of a book club is the opportunity it affords to share fast-paced, stimulating conversation about a title that others have read and enjoyed (or not!). Inviting your students to participate in lively, dynamic book clubs is a surefire way to hook them as lifelong readers, who know how to crack open text to relish the riches: exquisite literary language; intriguing ideas; fascinating, content-rich information – all the myriad pleasures that make books such remarkable companions (Short, 1986; Eeds and Peterson, 2007; Harvey & Harvey, 2009; Hill, Noe, Johnson, 2001).

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## Reading and Writing Connections

“I still hold that the greatest joy being a writer is that I can read all I want to and call it work.”

– Katherine Paterson,  
National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, 2010-2011

## Key Findings

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- » **Writing makes comprehension visible** (Serravallo, 2012, 13; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Hebert, 2010).
- » **Every time we enter a text as a reader, we receive a writing lesson** (Culham, 2014; 2012; Paterson, 2014).
- » **Wide reading promotes strategic comprehension** (Roessing, 2009).

## More to Know

Again, what seems to distinguish students who succeed from those who don't is the ability to engage independently in a close analysis of demanding text – and there may be no better way to accomplish that goal than through writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Two of the most comprehensive reading-writing research studies are meta-analyses: 1. Graham & Perin (2007) and 2. Graham & Hebert (2010). Both reveal that writing has a strong and consistently positive impact on reading comprehension. The authors explain:

“Transforming a mental summary of text into writing requires additional thought about the essence of the material, and the permanence of writing creates an external record of this synopsis that can be readily critiqued.”

The benefits of writing about text are both abundant and profound – and mirror the kind of thinking we want our students to do when they are reading (Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Hebert, 2010):

- » Engage in deep thinking about ideas.
- » Draw on their own knowledge and experience.
- » Consolidate and review information.
- » Reformulate thinking.
- » Organize and integrate ideas.
- » Be explicit about text evidence.
- » Be reflective.
- » Note personal involvement.
- » Capture the reading experience in their own words.

Researchers and educators alike note the mutual benefits of pairing reading with writing and vice versa:

Having students write about a text should enhance reading comprehension because it affords greater opportunities to think about ideas in a text, requires them to organize and integrate those ideas into a coherent whole, fosters explicitness, facilitates reflection, encourages personal involvement with texts, and involves students in transforming ideas into their own words. In short, writing about a text should enhance comprehension because it provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing and manipulating key ideas in text (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

Writing helps students better understand what they read by engaging them actively in practicing comprehension. Students must understand what they are reading to present their ideas about texts effectively in writing. This requires students to go back to the text, reread, monitor their understanding and clarify misunderstandings. Again, writing about texts pushes students to practice the habits of effective reading (Hampton & Resnick, 2008).

“Setting up time for students to talk and write about what they are

thinking is one way to move students forward as people who think independently about what they are reading” ... people who “share what they wonder about, what they notice and what they are thinking in a variety of ways” (Czekanski, 2012).

Writing makes reading comprehension visible and that, Australian researcher John Hattie (2009) reminds us, is the heart of effective teaching: When we can see what our students know and what they need to know, we can create clear goals for each student and provide the targeted feedback they need to surge forward:

“Teachers need to know the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students’ current knowledge and understanding and the success criteria of: ‘Where are you going?’, ‘How are you going?’, and ‘Where to next?’”

### Reading Like a Writer

And then, too, there’s the teaching power of reading; we learn to write, spell, punctuate, structure a sentence, a paragraph, a text through voluminous reading. It’s not a coincidence that so many published writers point to the voluminous reading they did as children as both their inspiration and their instruction for their own exemplary writing. Listen to author Lola Schaefer in Ruth Culham’s *The Writing Thief* (IRA, 2014) explain:

“I’m not sure which comes first, the reading or the writing. Early on in my career, the reading had the strongest impact. I immersed myself in children’s books – both classics and the newer titles. I passionately studied them for pacing, vocabulary, cadence, humor, voice, leads, use of figurative language and endings. I learn so much from reading like a writer, and still do (p. 27).”

### Closing Thoughts

Reading and writing are mutually supportive language processes. Separating them makes about as much sense as separating talking and listening. Fortunately, new more rigorous standards call for the integration of the language arts; we’re challenged to find ways to invite our students to benefit from the full power of all: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

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## FAMILY LITERACY

“The family seems to be the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the child’s development. **Without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and what few effects are achieved are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued.**”

– Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner,  
Harvard Family Research

- » Oral Language – The Foundation of Literacy
- » The Power of Speaking Two (or More) Languages
- » Home Reading Culture
- » The Read-Aloud Plus Text Talk Maximizes Learning



## Oral Language—The Foundation of Literacy

“Hug your children by surrounding them with love and language. Talk is the road that leads to reading and changes lives.”

– Dr. Adria Klein, Professor Emerita of Education  
California State University, San Bernardino

### Key Findings

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- » Oral language development precedes literacy and then parallels it; both oral and written language are developmental language processes that are mutually supportive and develop over time (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013; Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses, 2005).
- » Parents’ interactive strategies, particularly the quality of their language that they share with their children and the books they read aloud, are strongly related with their children’s language development (Hart & Risley, 2003; Landry & Smith, 2006).
- » The interactive read-aloud (reading aloud plus conversation about the book) also known as *dialogic reading* is a particularly potent early language experience for young children (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013; Bennett-Armistead, Duke & Moses, 2005).
- » The understandings about reading that young children acquire through oral language include the following (Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998):
  - » Basic language components that both oral and written language share in common such as lexical, syntactic and interpretive processes.
  - » Cognitive mechanisms such as working memory.
  - » Conceptual memory such as vocabulary and topic knowledge.

## More to Know: **The Scientist in the Crib**

Language development begins well before infants begin making their first words. In their widely read book, *The Scientist in the Crib* (1999), Gopnick, Meltzoff and Kuhl maintain that processing speech sounds begins in early infancy. Infants quickly become language-specific listeners – by four months they pay attention only to sounds heard in the language to which they have been exposed.

Infants make sounds that imitate the tones and rhythms of adult talk. They “read” gestures and facial expressions and begin to associate words and meanings. At birth, even before they speak or understand language, **infants begin processing the speech stream around them in order to determine the sounds of the language (phonology), and the form and structure of the language (syntax).**

By the time they are 12 months of age, they will have “cracked the code” for many of these properties as they prepare to produce their first spoken words. Here they will show they are mapping what they know about the form of language to what language means (semantics). Over the first 12 months, the infant is conducting many different analyses of the speech stream, working on all the dimensions of language at once – phonology, syntax, semantics (Lust, 2006).

**By the time children are about three years old, they will have mastered much of the basic system of the language around them** (Lust, 2006).

## More to Know: Learning to Use Language

Parents differ in the amount of structure they use; for example, as children grow and develop into the preschool years, many parents pull back from repeating and extending their child’s language. They also ease up on directives and invite the child to take the lead. The impact of directness varies across ages. In the early toddler period, higher degrees can support language skills, but by preschool, it begins to interfere. While it’s important to maintain a “moderate level” of linguistic challenge, it’s essential to let the child take the initiative with language and not be overly directive (Landry and Smith, 2011).

We can observe children’s literacy development through their use of literacy materials. After babies can purposefully grasp and manipulate objects, board books become a part of their exploration. Infants between 8 and 12 months who are read to regularly progress from mouthing books to playing with the covers to turning pages. This book handling is usually accompanied by babbling, which reflects an adult’s vocalizations during reading (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory).

As children continue to develop as language users, they learn the grammatical structure of their language, expand their vocabulary and gain metalinguistic skills. Metalinguistic skills involve not only the ability to use language but also the ability to think about it, play with it, analyze it, talk about it and make judgments about correct forms (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Bennett-Armistead, Duke, Moses, 2005; Hailey, 2014; Klein, 2014).

Young children also use their language in connection with everyday literacy events, such as (with their parents’ help) searching for and clipping needed coupons, sorting the mail, checking the TV guide for favorite shows, following a recipe to make dinner – providing an opportunity

for researchers and caregivers to observe their ideas about literacy. In these ways, children learn how to “connect life with literacy” (Morrow, 2008; Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013).

### **A Thirty Million Word Gap: The Hart-Risely Study**

In order to develop a robust vocabulary and extensive conceptual knowledge, children need rich language input that enables them to understand what objects are called and how they work or go together. Hart & Risely (1999) conducted a seminal longitudinal research study that examined parents’ talk to children among families from varying socioeconomic levels – identified as welfare, working class and professional families – and discovered dramatic differences among the richness of words children from lower socioeconomic levels heard compared to their peers from middle or more affluent levels.

Their study of parent-child talk in families in Kansas was conducted over a decade. A team of researchers recorded one full hour of every word spoken at home between parent and child in 42 families over a three-year period, with children from seven months to 36 months of age, and then spent six additional years typing, coding and analyzing 30,000 pages of transcripts.

Follow-up studies by Hart and Risely of those same children at age nine showed that there was a very tight link between the academic success of a child and the number of words the child’s parents spoke to the child at age three.

We can summarize their three Key Findings:

- » The variation in children’s IQs and language abilities is relative to the amount parents speak to their children.
- » Children’s academic successes at ages nine and ten are attributable to the amount of talk they hear from birth to age three.
- » Parents of advanced children talk significantly more to their children than do parents of children who are not as advanced.

In general, children from the wealthiest families heard more than 1,500 more words each hour, on average, than children from economically challenged families (616 vs. 2,153 words each hour). Ultimately, children who are immersed in rich language may hear 30 million more words by the time they enter school than children who don’t. What’s more, they are more likely to hear language used to accentuate the positive and encourage, rather than discouraging language used to reprimand and criticize. And these essential differences are reflected in the test scores administered to the same children when they are nine and ten years old.

One word of caution: We want to avoid making assumptions about children’s language or literacy level based simply on their families’ professional, educational or economic status. Children arrive at school with a wide variety of experiences. The goal of an educator is to get to know each child as a unique learner and work with the family to promote literacy both at home and at school.

### **Fostering Oral Language**

Immerse children in rich language – both oral and written – beginning at birth. We need to speak directly to our young children every day; researchers suggest that for optimal development infants and toddlers should hear 30,000 words per day.

Children learn not only from language you address to them, but also from language they overhear around them (Au et al., 2002). Linguistic interaction has additional positive effects on linguistic development.

Although exposure to language is essential, explicit “drilling” is not needed for the normally developing child. Parents don’t so much “teach” the child, as the child discovers language. As one linguist explains, children are “spontaneous apprentices” (Miller, 1976); they latch themselves to their caregivers and follow and learn from their every move, including absorbing the almost innumerable ways in which adults use language, both oral and written (Klein, 2014).

Read to children, encourage them to ask questions and to talk about what is read, and surround them with language through literacy. Reading aloud to children is tremendously important but reading and *discussing the reading* is even more potent and beneficial (Whitehurst, et al., 1988).

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## Three Dimensions of Oral Language Experience Linked to Later Literacy Success

By David Dickinsen and Patton Tabors

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**Exposure to varied vocabulary.** Knowing the “right word” is vital if one is to communicate information clearly. We have long known that large vocabularies are instrumental to reading success (e.g., Anderson & Freebody 1981); a robust vocabulary also signals that children are building the content knowledge about the world that is so critical to later reading (Neuman 2001).

**Opportunities to be part of conversations that use extended discourse.** Extended discourse is talk that requires participants to develop understandings beyond the here and now and that requires the speaker to use multiple sentences to build a linguistic structure, such as in explanations, narratives or pretend talk.

**Home and classroom environments** that are cognitively and linguistically stimulating. Children are most likely to experience conversations that include comprehensible and interesting extended discourse and are rich with vocabulary when their parents are able to obtain and read good books - and when their teachers provide classrooms with a curriculum that is varied and stimulating (2002).

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# Speaking Two (or More) Languages is Better Than One

“Language does not need to be only accepted. It needs to be explored, expanded, celebrated.”

—Dr. Alma Flor Ada,  
Professor Emerita, University of San Francisco

## Key Findings

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- » One of the greatest feats of human development is language learning. Children are well equipped, beginning at birth, to accomplish the complex task of learning language (Lust, 2006).
- » Learning a second language does not cause language confusion, language delay or cognitive deficit, which have been concerns in the past. In fact, according to studies at the Cornell Language Acquisition Lab (CLAL), children who learn a second language can maintain attention despite outside stimuli better than children who know only one language (Lust, 2006).
- » Becoming bilingual creates cognitive advantages, which contribute to a child's future academic success (Espinosa, 2008; Lust, 2006). One major study involving the evaluation of bilingual Head Start programs revealed that bilingual instruction was positively linked to enhanced cognitive language development, concept development and perceptual motor development (Sandoval-Martinez, 1982).
- » Research demonstrates that bilingualism enhances the development of executive attention and facilitates superior performance in bilinguals as compared to monolingual counterparts on an executive attention test. (Yang & Lust, 2009).
- » Children will learn two languages best if they know that both languages are important and valued. Children also need to have lots of fun and meaningful opportunities to talk, read and pretend-write in both languages (Freeman & Freeman, 2007). Learning a second language also means learning a second culture and ways of being.

## More to Know: Linguistic Geniuses

Young children are very good at learning more than one language – and not only can they learn multiple languages, they can learn *when* to speak and write each language and *to whom*. The earlier they learn the second or third or fourth language, the more likely they are to achieve native-like proficiency.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children explains how this works:

“For children whose primary language is other than English, studies have shown that a strong basis in a first language promotes school achievement in a second language (Cummins, 1979). Children who are learning English as a second language are more likely to become readers and writers of English when they are already familiar with the vocabulary and concepts in their primary language. In this respect, oral and written language experiences should be regarded as an additive process, ensuring that children are able to maintain their home language while also learning to speak and read English (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Including non-English materials and resources to the extent possible can help to support children’s first language while children acquire oral proficiency in English.”

Spend time with a child who is learning to speak and in no time you’ll hear language that surprises and delights with its unique *inventiveness*, as children invent their way into conventional language. Children do, indeed, say the darnedest things, but what they say is always systematic and rule-governed, and it reflects their brilliant hypotheses about “how language works” – and how they can use it to accomplish what they’re trying to do, whether they are learning one language or more.

A sound foundation in the first language – spoken and written – creates the best conditions for the acquisition of a second language. Research demonstrates the importance of literacy in the first language for students’ full development of proficiency in the language of instruction, subsequent academic success and high levels of self-confidence. What’s more, academic and linguistic skills transfer to the second language, even when the target language has a dissimilar writing system from the first language (Cummins, 1991; Goldenberg, 2011). For example, children who learned to read and write in Spanish in their Honduran home and school do not have to start from the beginning to learn to read in English in their new American school.

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## Home Reading Culture

“Young children who have access to books in the home and who are read aloud to regularly have the best chance of becoming successful readers.”

– Dr. Catherine Snow,  
Professor of Education, Harvard

## Key Findings

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- » Children raised in homes with more than 500 books spent three years longer in school than children whose parents had only a few books. According to the abstract, growing up in a household with 500 or more books is “as great an advantage as having university-educated rather than unschooled parents, and twice the advantage of having a professional rather than an unskilled father.”
- » The results suggest that children whose parents have lots of books are nearly 20 percent more likely to finish college. Indeed, as a predictor of college graduation, books in the home trump even the education of the parents. Lest you think that only the privileged with the means to purchase books reap the benefit of books: not so. Even a child who hails from a home with 25 books will, on average, complete two more years of school than would a child from a home without any books at all.
- » Regardless of how many books the family already has, each addition to a home library helps the children get a little farther in school. But the gains are not equally great across the entire range; rather, they are larger at the bottom, far below the elite level, in getting children from modest families a little further along in the first few years of school. Moreover, having books in the home has a greater impact on children from the least educated families, not on children of the university-educated elite (Evans, et al., 2010).
- » In general, the books help establish a reading or “scholarly culture” in the home – one that persists from generation to generation within families, largely independent of education and class – creating a “taste for books” and promoting the skills and knowledge that foster both literacy and numeracy and, thus, lead to lifelong academic advantages.
- » According to the *2013 Scholastic Kids & Family Reading Report*, having reading role model parents or many books in the home has a greater impact on kids’ reading frequency than household income.
- » Building reading into kids’ schedules and regularly bringing additional books into

the home for children positively impact kids' reading frequency (Cunningham & Zibulsky, 2013).

- » Children spend the vast majority of their time OUTSIDE of school – the average 10-year-old has spent 87,600 hours outside of school. Kids who don't read outside of school won't become proficient readers.

## More to Know: The Impact of the Presence of Books

A study titled “Family Scholarly Culture and Educational Success: Books and Schooling in 27 Nations,” published in *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, produced the astonishing information that just the mere presence of books profoundly impacts a child’s academic achievement. Conducted over 20 years, the research by Evans, Kelley, Sikorac, and Treimand (2010) surveyed more than 70,000 people across 27 countries.

The authors report that their reading culture theory, backed by evidence, leads to the following predictions:

- » Parents’ participation in reading culture – which provides skills and knowledge – will enhance children’s educational attainment in all societies, regardless of the parents’ formal education and social class.
- » An increase in reading culture has the greatest impact on children from families with little reading culture to begin with. It is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters the most: each additional book yields more “bang for your book” among the book-poor than among the book-rich.
- » A reading culture in the home matters more if parents are poorly educated, but matters less if parents are well educated. In other words, the greatest impact of book access occurs among the least educated and poorest families.

[A note of caution: the authors write, “Our results do not in any way imply that formal schooling cannot compensate for the absence of scholarly culture in the home; but they do highlight the fact that children from homes lacking in scholarly culture may require special attention.”]

Charles Bayless (2010) speaks also of a “reading culture” that develops in homes when children are able to read and enjoy their own books in their own environment:

“The findings reveal what so many have both suspected and innately known to be true – access to print materials does, in fact, improve children’s reading skills, among other critical educational factors. This research is conclusive evidence for educators, parents and communities to better understand the significance of making print material available for children at school and in the home. For the majority of young people, enthusiastic and habitual reading is the single most predictive personal habit [leading to] desirable life outcomes. Enthusiastic and habitual reading is primarily a function of the family environment and culture, and it is most effectively inculcated in the earliest years (0–6), but can be accomplished at any age. Creating a reading culture can be achieved objectively and through a series of specific behaviors and activities undertaken by parents – but it requires access to books, time, persistence and consistency.”

Of course, in today’s digital world, parents are facing new challenges as they work to inspire a love of reading in their children. According to the Kids & Family Reading Report, nearly half of parents say their child does not spend enough time reading for fun and spends too much time on social network sites or playing video games. Parents’ concern has increased since 2010 for children across all age groups (2013).

## Closing Thoughts

As researcher Jim Lindsay notes, “The mere presence of books in the home profoundly impacts a child’s academic achievement (2010). Research from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS; Mullis & Martin, 2007) reports much of the same. Surveying 215,000 students across 40 countries, PIRLS 2006 was one of the largest international assessments of reading literacy ever undertaken. Results from this study also show a similar impact of books in the home and the benefits of a home library and reading culture.

## Home Activities Fostering Reading Literacy

- » The researchers found a positive relationship between students’ reading achievement at the fourth grade and parents having engaged their children in early literacy activities before starting school (e.g., reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys and playing word games).
- » The presence of children’s books in the home also continued to show a strong positive relationship with reading achievement. The average reading achievement difference between students from homes with many children’s books (more than 100) and those from homes with few children’s books (10 or fewer) was very large (91 score points, almost 1 standard deviation). On average across countries, there was a slight decrease in parents’ reports of the number of children’s books in the home, perhaps reflecting increased access to Internet-based literacy media.
- » In PIRLS 2006, on average across countries, 37 percent of the fourth-grade students had parents who read more than five hours a week: 43 percent for one to five hours, and 20 percent for less than one hour a week. Not surprisingly, reading achievement was highest for students whose parents had favorable attitudes toward reading. In PIRLS 2006, on average across countries, the majority of students (52 percent) had parents with favorable attitudes.

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## The Read-Aloud Plus Text Talk Maximizes Learning

“By employing research-based methods for reading aloud – such as the interactive read-aloud – teachers and parents can maximize the effectiveness of reading aloud, thereby enhancing the reading experiences and the achievement of students.”

– Dr. Holly Lane and Dr. Tyran Wright,  
Literacy Educators

## Key Findings

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- » The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that pediatricians encourage parents to read aloud daily, beginning as early as six months of age (2014). Dr. Pamela High, lead author of the AAP policy explains the aim: “... those 15-20 minutes spent reading with a child can be the best part of the day. It’s a joyful way to build child-parent relationships and set a child on the pathway to developing early literacy skills.”
- » Researchers maintain that the most valuable aspect of the read-aloud is the experience it gives young children with decontextualized language, requiring them to make sense of ideas that are about something beyond the here and now (Beck & McKeown, 2001).
- » Children enter school able to think and reason about the world in concrete situations that make sense to them. In school, however, they must learn to think in contexts that aren’t embedded in their physical surroundings. In school, largely through books, children learn to use symbol systems and deal with representations of the world (Cunningham & Zibulsky 2013).
- » The interactive read-aloud results in student gains in vocabulary (Beck & McKeown, 2001), comprehension strategies and story schema (Van den Broek, 2001), and concept development (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Pinnell & Fountas, 2011).
- » However, simply inviting children to talk during interactive read-alouds doesn’t provide the needed learning boost. It’s the close reading – deep, intentional conversation about the text (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Lever & Sénéchal, 2011; and Shanahan, 2012) – that makes the difference.

## More to Know: **Doctor's Orders: Read Aloud Every Day**

The American Academy of Pediatrics, which represents 62,000 pediatricians, recommends reading aloud to infants from birth. As a result, our youngest children, birth to three, will enjoy a significant increase in important brain development – stimulated by daily read-alouds. The formal recommendation, in part, is meant to enhance young children's vocabulary development and other communication skills. **The aim is increase the number of words that children hear before they are able to speak and use the words.** According to research, and pediatric development, **talking and singing to infants can result in advances in cognition that are recognizable as early as 18 months** (Needlman, 2014).

### **The Learning Power of Decontextualization**

Wasik and Bond (2001) investigated the learning potential of the interactive read-aloud. Their study, which included 121 four-year-old children from low-income families (94 percent of whom were African-American), engaged the treatment group in interactive book reading and book reading extension activities. **The interactive read-aloud included defining vocabulary words, providing opportunities for children to use words from the books, asking open-ended questions and giving children with chance to talk and be heard.**

Control teachers received all the books treatment teachers did. These books were read as often in control classrooms as they were in treatment classrooms; however, control teachers did not receive the interactive read-aloud training that treatment teachers did.

“For the first four weeks of the intervention, an experienced teacher modeled the shared book reading techniques in each treatment classroom and assisted with reading extension activities. For the next 11 weeks, treatment teachers ran the program on their own. At post-test, treatment classes scored significantly higher on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary-III than did control classes. Treatment classes also scored significantly higher on their knowledge of target vocabulary words. Classroom observations found that teachers in the treatment group were significantly and substantially more likely than control teachers to use the target words during related activities.”

**Programs that promote early at-home reading foster positive attitudes toward reading aloud, increase the frequency and regularity of parent-child reading, and stimulate vocabulary growth. Furthermore, early literacy programs are most effective for children at greatest risk of developing reading problems, including children from low-income households and Latino children, in particular, whose parents want to help but may not have the time, resources or know-how to do so (Juel, 2006). Early readers have a head start in their academic career that will last a lifetime, while poor readers often fall behind and may never catch up. Connie Juel (2006) found that if a child is a poor reader at the end of first grade, there is a .88 probability that that child would still be a poor reader at the end of fourth grade.**

We've long believed that the parent-child read-aloud plays a pivotal role in helping youngsters learn to read. An intergenerational reading study provides the research to back that belief. Indeed, the research demonstrates that not only is the read-aloud effective, the strength of the

relation between parent-preschooler reading and outcome measures “is as strong a predictor of reading achievement as is phonemic awareness.”

The available data on the read-aloud supports intergenerational literacy programs intended to stimulate parent-preschooler reading as an effective way to better prepare young children for beginning reading instruction. The results also support the hypothesis that book reading particularly affects acquisition of the written language register or storybook language – syntax and vocabulary (“once upon a time,” for example) that’s unique to the written language used in children’s literature. Children acquire this language as they hear stories read aloud – which eventually aids in reading comprehension. Furthermore, this meta-analysis shows that the effect of book reading is not restricted to children of preschool age. However, the effect seems to become smaller as soon as children become conventional readers and are able to read on their own. **The data makes clear that the parent-preschooler reading is a necessary preparation for beginning reading instruction at school** (Bus, van IJzendoorn, and Pellegrini, 1995).

## Closing Thoughts

**We can begin to read to babies on the day they are born. Set aside time every day for “reading time.” Read aloud to children, and, as they grow, ask them to read aloud to you, or encourage independent reading. Discuss with your children the different materials that you are reading and why, the books you are reading to them, and the books that they are reading on their own. As Jarrrels (2009) notes, when children are read three stories a day, by the time they enter first grade, they will have heard more than 6,000 books.**

**Create a “reading culture” inside the home (Jarrrels, 2009): cozy places to nestle with books; reading routines throughout the day; dinner table discussions about what family members are reading – including all the different print materials that pour into the house every day. Talk with children about their interests, plan trips to the library, and find books that will support and extend what interests your children most. Make books their first go-to resource.**

**As they move closer to kindergarten entry, some children will begin to track print and most will do so by the middle of kindergarten year. The real challenge to the beginning reader is not memorizing a word in isolation, but reading it within the continuous text while keeping meaning in mind.**

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# LIFETIME BENEFITS: OPEN A WORLD OF POSSIBLE

**“I can learn about anything, travel  
anywhere, ask my own questions and seek  
my own answers because I read.”**

– Donalyn Miller, Literacy Educator & Author

Renowned children’s librarian Frances Clark Sayers once famously declared, “I am summoned by books!” More than a decade inside the 21st century, such a declaration might seem quaint. But it is as potent now as it was when Sayers first uttered the words nearly 50 years ago. While today our summons may arrive via digital reader, the essence of books as a gateway to vibrant language, transcendent content and dimensions beyond our imaginations remains the same as ever. For that reason, as we consider the skills our students need to survive and thrive in the 21st century, let us understand that we and our students have no more essential, life-enhancing resource than the book.

Indeed, the adage “a rising tide lifts all boats” is apt when we consider independent reading. When we read independently, many other literacy skills rise, too. We have decades of research that prove avid readers are almost always skillful readers and strong writers. They know more about the conventions of language, such as spelling, punctuation and grammar (that’s because every time we open the pages of a book, we simultaneously get a lesson on effective writing); they have robust vocabularies; and they know about the world. Reading makes us smart (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Moss & Miller, 2013).

Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston (2012) have been researching a high-needs middle school in Virginia that implemented independent reading without any other instruction. The students were mostly reading novels, and they were soon hooked, wanting to spend all their time deep inside their books. Even though their state focuses mostly on nonfiction, and students were reading fiction, their test scores soared. What made the difference? “The kids hadn’t been reading, and now they were” (cited in Calkins, et al., 2012).

As you’ve followed your own interests through the Compendium, we hope you’ll be inspired as both an educator and parent – or a concerned citizen – to help the children in your life discover the immeasurable joy and power of reading.