“I DON’T READ NO BOOKS.”

HOW TEACHERS CAN USE STUDENTS’ LITERACY STORIES TO CHANGE LITERACY LIVES

by

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HOW TEACHERS CAN USE STUDENTS’ LITERACY STORIES

TO CHANGE LITERACY LIVES

Stephanie J. Malone, Ed.D.

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Practitioner knowledge, as the center for change in teacher education, is the heart of The Carnegie Project of the Educational Doctorate (CPED) program. Margaret Lata and Susan Wunder explain a key principal of CPED is to grow practitioners as change agents, through the development of a Problem of Practice. In their article, *Investing in the Formative Nature of Professional Learning: Redirecting, Mediating, and Generating Education Practice-as-Policy* (2012), they discuss how the capstone product that evolves from this Problem of Practice should impact the professional field by producing knowledge that informs and changes professional practice.

This Dissertation in Practice, *“I Don’t Read No Books.” How Teachers Can Use Students’ Literacy Stories to Change Literacy Lives*, explores my Problem of Practice: “How can I, a middle level reading teacher, discover my students’ stories and use those stories to improve learning?” This Dissertation in Practice focuses on literacy by encouraging educators to listen to and discover the stories of struggling readers and to use those stories to inform instructional practice. While there are several marketable literacy-based books on the market, the competing works focus on the teacher's perspective teaching reading strategies to struggling readers. These resources, however, give little voice to our students.

A narrative inquiry study was conducted for twelve weeks in a remedial reading intervention class for seventh graders with a class size of ten students in an urban, Nebraska school district. Reading intervention consists of students who read independently at only the first to second grade reading level. Students often struggle with emergent literacy skills, such as decoding and letter identification, reading fluency and using active reading strategies - visualizing a picture while reading, predicting what will happen next, making connections, clarifying the unfamiliar, inferring, summarizing and asking questions about the story.

"I Don't Read No Books." How Teachers Can Use Students' Literacy Stories to Change Literacy Lives particularly addresses the student through detailed and specific student narratives and provides educators with strategies to uncover student stories and adapt instruction to fit those students' needs.

To my students. You taught me.

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My late grandmother always told me, “Stephanie, you have to have a mess before things can be right.” The writing of this book, meddling through the mess, would not have been possible without the support and guidance of so many.

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To my parents. You instilled in me determination and a passion to learn. You also remind me constantly of how stubborn I can be until I reach my goals. Thank you.

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Think about doing your best job, so that yours will go farther," nudged me forward when I needed a push. Thank you for the second pair of eyes. I am forever grateful to you.

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And to my students. Your stories changed my teaching. Thank you for letting me in.

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INTRODUCTION

UNTETHERING TEACHING FRUSTRATION

Stubbornness fuels my passion. When I was ten, my mother, in her annual spring-cleaning marathon, deep cleaned my bed. Her method of deep cleaning involved stripping the bed of the sheets, vacuuming the mattress meticulously and then flipping and rotating it so that it would maintain shape. Afterwards, she made the bed with the summer linens. I did not like this ritual for some reason. After she was done and was distracted with something else, I awkwardly tried to flip my mattress back. My arms burned trying to lift it. How did she make it look so easy? Several times the mattress dropped from my grip and thumped onto the box spring. A few times I thought that maybe I should let the mattress (and my mother) win. But, then my stubbornness set in. I did not stop until I heard its final thump onto the box spring – the way I wanted it. Then I plopped myself on the bed, relieved.

Passion can drive what we do and help us become the best versions of ourselves. As a reading teacher for the past twelve years, I have learned students are stubborn and often lack passion to work hard to be good readers. Their stubbornness bumps against my stubbornness. This Introduction establishes a framework for how I began helping my stubborn struggling readers[1] improve their literacy skills through a conferencing system that allowed me to connect with students, gather their past literacy history, including family and school experiences, and use that information to design and tailor

[1] For the purposes of this book, I use the term "Struggling Reader" as a good thing, rather than having a negative connotation. To struggle is what we do when we experience difficultly. A productive struggle necessitates perseverance, critical thinking and engagement. Our students need to experience *productive* struggle. It might be hard and painful for them to let go of their stubbornness but necessary for them to become better readers.

individualized reading instruction. Section One describes the frustrations and problems that I encountered teaching struggling readers. Section Two explores how my choice (i.e. stubbornness) not to follow the standard curriculum led me to look closer at my students' literacy needs. Section Three explains the importance of this book and how it is organized.

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE AHEAD: MY TEACHING STORY

My first teaching experience with struggling readers began at an urban high school in 2008. I taught five sections of Reading Intervention to sixty students using a novel-based curriculum. Reading Intervention was a remedial reading class in my school district that supported students reading below grade level. The class met five days a week for a fifty-minute class period.

I felt frustrated when my struggling readers, slouched in their chairs, did not participate in class discussions of novels or hand in satisfactory written responses over comprehension questions. “Feed the seals” (offering candy as a reward) was the advice Mary, my mentor, shared with me during my first year of teaching high school reading. That was her way to engage students and her suggestion to me to help my adolescent, struggling readers become more engaged and motivated in their reading intervention class. Desperate for student engagement, I fed the seals. I asked a question and when a student responded, I tossed that particular student a Starburst. Their stubbornness towards reading created a passion to get candy. Unfortunately, feeding the seals as a strategy to engage and motivate my readers did not last long. I got tired of buying huge bags of Starburst candy, and it quickly proved to be ineffective. I was not improving their literacy skills and was barely motivating them for a single class period. My students needed to grow a real passion for reading.

My frustration with teaching a novel-based curriculum that lacked student engagement and methods to assess student literacy progress was not confined to the classroom or simply directed at my students. It made its way into meetings with teachers and parents whenever I was put on the spot regarding student progress. For instance,

during parent-teacher conferences or Individualized Educational Plan ("IEP") meetings, parents or guardians would ask me a very reasonable question, "What is my child's reading level?" As their child's reading teacher, I should have been able to tell them. But, on some level, I had no clue. So, I blubbered my way through those conversations by explaining that since their child was placed in Reading Intervention, according to the District, their child was reading independently at a first to second grade level. A typical follow up question would be, "What are you doing to help my child get on grade level?" My stubbornness set in. Someone once again flipped my mattress and I felt I needed to be able to flip it back. I started to reevaluate my teaching approach.

From my formal educational experience, I knew that what I was teaching my struggling readers looked more like an English curriculum than a reading intervention course. I felt frustrated, ineffective and underprepared as a reading teacher. What I had learned during my undergraduate studies and was learning at that time in my master level courses on reading development was the exact opposite of what my school district required me to teach. In practice, I was simply reading a novel with students and having them answer comprehension questions. I was not teaching reading skills or strategies to help my students acquire or improve their literacy. Essentially, I had no access to their reading process, just their product.

After four years of teaching high school struggling readers, I took a reading position to teach middle school struggling readers within the same school district. I wanted to see if intervention earlier would be a better use of my strengths and help ensure that fewer students ended up in the same high school class. Each school year, I found myself questioning how I could improve my teaching practice, while working within the

constraints of a novel-based curriculum. I began to explore the root of my middle school struggling readers' resistance towards literacy in my classroom. I questioned if my students were struggling due to a cognitive learning disability, an affective struggle or perhaps both.

During the 2015 school year, I started my doctoral program to grow my practitioner knowledge and solve my problem of practice. One of my graduate courses, *Place Conscious Education*, encouraged me to explore the idea that place is where experiences begin and stories emerge. I had an aha! moment as a teacher, when I read Sharon Bishop's, *The Power of Place* (2004), and Susan Martin's, *Writing into the World: Writing Marathons for Teaching Writing, Place, and Advocacy* (2013). Both of these writers unpack the meaning of place by explaining the places we occupy never leave us because they live deep inside of us. Until we begin to *notice* those places, we never will truly understand that particular space we have occupied. Stubbornness informs what we do. It fuels our passions yet can prevent us from knowing our place and our students. It prevents us from turning mattresses even when we should. When I moved past feeling stuck and the attitudes such as, "I do not have the time;" "My students cannot do that;" or "My administration would never allow me to try this intervention," I grew the capability to uncover what I only suspected might be possible with students. I started to question what I could learn from my students if I paused to look deeply inside their stories.

I have taught in a school district where conferencing is not the primary focus to improve a student's missing literacy skills. At the time of writing this book, my district was in the middle of piloting a new reading curriculum for middle school students. The

reading curriculum focused on small group instruction with whole group lessons once or twice a week and required students to read Scholastic Short Reads® leveled passages. Previously, the reading curriculum was novel-based, whole group instruction, not connected to students needs or interests, and lacked attention to the teaching of skills and strategies. Both reading curriculums are ridged in that they require teachers to teach specific guidelines, yet are flexible in how the teacher delivers instruction. While for some teachers this flexibility of both curriculums is well received, others find the flexibility challenging. I appreciate the flexibility, as it allows me to adjust and change my teaching to fit the needs of my students.

Conferencing with students is not a new approach in the field of educational research, but a practice new to me. I realize my approach to grow students as readers, through a conferencing system is a rediscovery of old knowledge buried under the layers of curricula, district mandates, No Child Left Behind, and top down reading programs. The work from Nancy Atwell, *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* (1998), Carl Anderson, *How's It Going* (2000), Lucy Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Reading* (2001), Jennifer Serravallo and Gravity Goldberg, *Conferring with Readers* (2007), and Laura Robb, *Teaching Middle School Writers* (2010), continues to be my guiding post. Their work teaches educators how to setup reading or writing conference workshops, then listen to and guide students to improve their reading or writing skills.

With approval from my principal, I began working closely with one of my eighth-grade reading intervention classes to uncover my students' literacy needs. I individually met with students and interviewed them about their reading. Through our conversations, I

found students disliked reading because they “couldn’t get the picture inside their heads;” reading “was boring;” they didn’t understand “the point of reading;” or they “got stuck on big words.” Learning about who my struggling readers were as readers beyond my classroom helped me recognize the friction between what was taught and what *should* be taught to struggling adolescent readers. My students did not need a novel-based curriculum or direct instruction over skills and strategies. They needed me to notice them and provide effective literacy instruction tailored to fit their individual needs, which forced me to have conversations with my students about their literacy needs. That’s how we began conversations at the *beach*.

Teacher Talk #1

I have been fortunate to work with administrators who allowed me to do what is effective for my students, even when that means going against mandated district curriculum. While having supportive administrators makes doing what is right for students easier, I realize some teachers do not have this luxury in their classrooms. Whatever the case, I urge you to create open dialogue with your administration team. In my experience, administrators are open to change and will support instruction that is beneficial for students. However, if your administration is not open to change, refrain from being stubborn and instead find small opportunities to get to know your students, as well as those moments when you can put your spin on teaching. Also, as you read this book, keep in mind that it is only meant to support your teaching practice, not provide an alternative to district requirements. More on this later.

"LET'S GO TO THE BEACH:" CONVERSATIONS WITH AIDAN, MARK, AND JESSICA

Aidan: "I can't get that picture inside my head, Miss."

Seventh period. I stand outside Room 210 greeting both excited and reluctant students. By this time of day, most students do not want reading support; they want to go home. The tardy bell rings, and I see Aidan shuffle down the hallway wearing his bright blue hoodie, his bulging red binder in tow. "Good afternoon, Aidan." I wait for his barely audible, irritated "Hi" as he walks pass me entering our classroom. "Students, how are you?" My eighth graders are seated and begin sharing their days and after school plans. Aidan grabs his folder and tosses it onto his table and shoves himself into his seat. He sits slouched with his head resting on the bulging red binder for the entire fifty-minute class period.

Learning Aidan's story was challenging. However, when he finally opened up, I realized that I had failed him. Instead of encouraging Aidan, I ignored him for the first semester. Reading my words now as a parent of two school-age children, I feel outraged and ashamed. How could a teacher just ignore a student? But as a teacher, I get it. I understand when to stay firm and to just walk away. To illustrate, as parents we stay firm in some situations and more flexible in others. I do not budge on bedtime. However, when my daughter wants to leave the house wearing mismatched clothing, I do not push her to change. Instead, I let her wear the outfit to avoid her breaking into a blubbery and angry mess. With Aidan, I learned when I could push him to do class work and when it was best to walk away, so he would not escalate and interfere with the classroom-learning environment. Choosing when to intervene and when to let go needs to be done

carefully; a student's choice becomes a habit harder and harder to break. With Aidan his choice to put his head down, rather than engage in learning, over time created a reading gap and one that he did not try to improve.

Some days, Aidan walked into the classroom, grabbed his red classroom folder, sat down and wanted to engage in conversation.

AIDAN: "I hate her."

TEACHER: "Hate who?"

AIDAN: "My mom."

TEACHER: "Why do you hate your mom?"

AIDAN: "She's making me do track, and I hate track."

On these days, he was open and I pushed him more. When he performed a simple learning task, such as writing vocabulary words, I often publicly praised him by saying something like "Aidan is our vocabulary king for the day." The rest of the class joined, cheering and clapping. He would smile and look down, not quite sure how to respond. Unfortunately, these moments were rare. My early interactions with Aidan typically went like this:

TEACHER: "Hi, Aidan. How are you today?"

AIDAN: "Leave me alone."

The tone of his voice told me to not push him. These days were challenging. Often, I was tired of his negative attitude. I wanted him to come into the classroom and just do the work. His tone told me it was not going to happen. So, I let him sleep the entire class period.

One day, a student in the class asked me, “Ms. Malone, what about Aidan? How do we get him to read?” Students had noticed Aidan’s withdrawal from class and that I was doing nothing. I was shamed into action and into noticing that I nearly gave up on Aidan. During the next weeks, I began reaching out to Aidan. I called him over to the beach (a lounge area with Adirondack chairs separated by a small round table in our classroom) to talk. Students find the beach less formal than the regular classroom seating, so I thought connecting with Aidan there would be more comfortable. Usually, Aidan ignored my requests to talk at the beach. However, at this point, I would not fail him anymore. When Aidan finally pulled himself up and shuffled over to the beach, I felt victorious. Even though it was a tiny step, something had budged and I could wiggle in and reach him. We did not read a story but talked about his family, what he does after school and (of course) soccer. Our conversations were a turning point for Aidan and for me as his teacher.

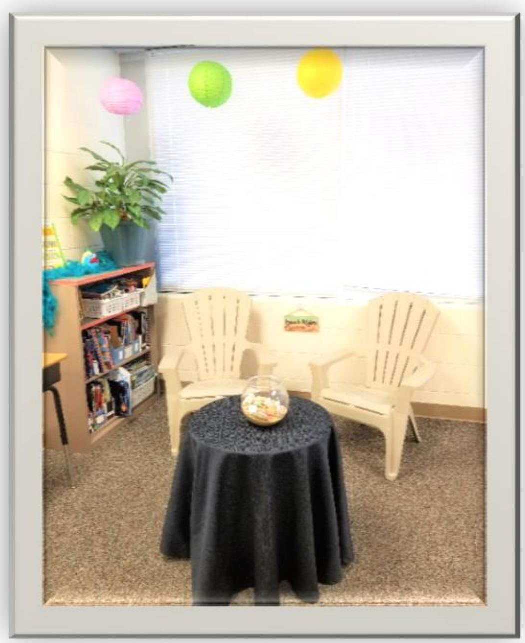

Figure 1: The Beach

Our beach chats became routine. After Aidan's classmates started their reading assignments, Aidan would walk over to the beach area without me asking. Our conversations focused on his interests, his family and his hopes for the future. I did not push Aidan to read until he grew comfortable with me. When I finally asked him if he wanted to start reading a story, his initial response was no. I did not press him. The following day, I asked Aidan if he was ready to read just the first paragraph of a story with me. Aidan stared at me. I stared back trying to prepare a response to his typical "no." I was frustrated and started to think that he was never going to be ready and maybe there was nothing I could do to help him. Then he responded. "Yea, sure." Aidan picked up the short story and stared at it.

AIDAN: "Only the first paragraph?"

TEACHER: "Yes, just the first paragraph." He kept staring at the story, rubbing his hand on his jeans. "Aidan?"

AIDAN: "I can't do that thing."

TEACHER: "What thing, Aidan?"

AIDAN: "You know, when you are reading and you see things, like the TV thing you talk about?"

TEACHER: "Visualizing?"

AIDAN: "Yea, I just can't get that picture inside my head, Miss."

Mark: "I don't read books. My teachers do."

Mark enters the classroom bellowing, "Hello. I'm here in this stupid class," and slaps his black binder on his table. I am sitting on the stool placed in the back of the classroom listening to a student share her weekend. I sigh at his typical obnoxious

behavior. “Good morning, Mark.” He says nothing to me and instead runs over to another student who just entered the classroom. They laugh uncontrollably. I remind them to get ready for class. Mark does not listen and paces the classroom.

TEACHER: “Mark, can you please take your seat? We are going to start class now.”

MARK: “No, I don’t want to.”

I take a breath. I feel challenged and pressured to continue teaching for the other students, yet managing bad behaviors does not naturally lend to doing both tasks well.

TEACHER: “Students please find your fluency partners and begin reading.”

Papers are shuffled and student voices fill the classroom as they find their partners and reading places. Then finally, I hear the murmur of reading. Mark is standing by the bookshelf looking around the room.

TEACHER: “What’s going on today?”

MARK: “Nothing.”

His tone is aggressive. I try to get more out of him by asking if he is having a difficult day and sharing something from my own experiences. He tells me he does not care with such force that I almost believe him. I remind him of our classroom expectations and ask him if he thinks he can follow those expectations. He tells me, “Nope” and walks out of the classroom.

In the following weeks, Mark’s behavior became more challenging. On one occasion, I suggest that he and I work together on the reading assignment. He shouts, “No way!” and leaves the room. I did not know what to do with him.

During winter conferences, I ask Mark to tell me about reading class. We sit at the

beach. He is slouched back in a beach chair looking around the room until he offered his typical responses, “I want to go to PE” and “It’s boring stuff we do in reading.” I stare at him.

Teacher: “Tell me what you mean.” He looks up at me and his tone becomes more irritable.

Mark: “We read too much in reading class. All we do is read.”

I pause and then break the classroom silence with a “Yes!” Mark just stared at me. Students start chuckling. Some questioned, “Ms. Malone, are you okay?” I slide back into the beach chair and let his words sink in.

He hated reading class because he had to *practice* reading. I went on to ask Mark what reading is like in his other classes. He told me, “I don’t read books in other classes. My teachers do.” Mark went on to explain that in his other classes, his teachers read the text out loud and he simply had to listen. He had few opportunities to practice reading.

Jessica: “I just started asking questions!”

My fourth period reading students had been practicing how to be active readers. For the purposes of this book, the term active reader is a reader who automatically engages with the text by making predictions, asking questions, visualizing, inferring, making connections and summarizing. Teaching my students how to be active readers instead of expert word callers (decodes words but does not comprehend) was challenging. My students were mostly concerned with finishing the assignment and not so much with understanding what they

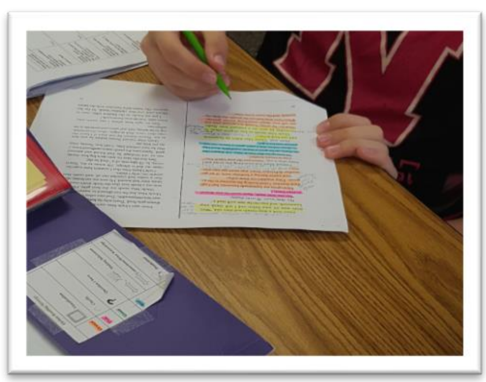

Figure 2: Student learning how to code text.

read. Jessica was one of those students. She read the text fluently, but when I asked her, "What did you think of the last part?" She struggled to respond. Most of my students became frustrated moving from word caller to active reader. Mostly, students scribbled "wow" throughout the text, which certainly was not the active reading I had in mind.

I first met Jessica during an open house at the beginning of the school year. While her mom and dad visited with me, she looked down at the floor or her gaze wandered around the classroom. Despite her shyness, she always greeted me at the classroom door with a big smile and a pleasant greeting. Sometimes she asked to eat lunch with me to redo reading assignments or to be surrounded by quietness.

After my first lesson in teaching my students how to be active readers and making their thinking visible, Jessica asked to talk with me about reading. As the class cleared out, Jessica stood by the whiteboard clutching her binder. When everyone had left she looked down at the floor, pulled her binder closer to her chest and told me that she did not know how to ask questions when she read. I had not given my students guiding prompts for each strategy.

The following day Jessica was the first student to arrive to class. "Hi, Ms. Malone. How's your day?" Her cheery voice made me smile. I showed her the strategy cards that I had made the day before and thanked her for letting me know she was having a hard time asking questions. Each card listed an active reading strategy that we were working on. I also made bookmarkers available to Jessica and her classmates to help prompt their thinking. For the rest of the week, Jessica and her classmates worked on making their thinking visible using the strategy cards. Students were beginning to write questions and make longer predictions throughout the text.

One day, I called Jessica over to the beach to discuss her reading. As I was looking over her text, I saw paragraphs with several thoughts written in the margins demonstrating active reading, but then I noticed sections, sometimes one to two pages long, with little to no writing. I asked Jessica why she was demonstrating being an active reader in some text sections but not in others. Jessica picked up her paper and carefully looked it over. “I don’t know why I do that.” I explained to her that active readers constantly interact with the text; they have a movie playing in their minds. I had her explain what she thought was happening in her blank sections. Jessica explained that sometimes she just gets tired of reading and will start to think of other things. I worked with her that day on rereading each paragraph, stopping and prompting her to ask a question, to predict or to use one of the other seven key strategies we were working on. When we finished, Jessica looked up at me with a big smile, “Wow, Ms. Malone. I did not know I could do that!”

Working with Jessica taught me that if I wanted my students to be active readers, I had to teach them how to monitor their comprehension. When students came into the classroom the following week, I provided for them five different colored highlighters in zip lock bags - each color representing one of our strategies. I instructed that whenever they have a thought to highlight the text with the appropriate color and then write out their thought. I told them I wanted to see their text covered in colors. This workshop went well. Maybe it was the highlighting that hooked them or the fact that they felt more confident as readers because they could *see* how they were interacting with text.

After our active reader workshop had taken place, Jessica came running into my room shouting my name.