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Laboratory School Leaders Provide Support for Literacy

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Laboratory School Leaders Provide Support for Literacy Teachers

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Laboratory School Leaders Provide Support for Literacy Teachers

Abstract

Laboratory school leaders can greatly influence reading achievement among students. In this light, the authors propose that school leaders, by becoming more aware of their own journey in becoming readers, are encouraged to strengthen reading programs in their own schools. Consequently, writing a memoir titled "My Life as a Reader" can be used to encourage reflection on becoming a reader. In this study, analysis of the memoirs of school leaders provided substantial evidence supporting the conclusion that experiences with books and interested adults greatly encourages eventual reading achievement. The subjects in this paper are school leaders; however, application of the strategies employed can be applied in a variety of settings such as school faculty meetings, college education classes, and parent involvement sessions.

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Reading proficiency is considered fundamental to success in school and the workplace. American workers have seen an economy that has evolved from a society with abundant jobs in agriculture and manufacturing to an age of information requiring high literacy competencies. The dynamics of the 21st Century global economy emphasize the need for both affective and pedagogically sound strategies for fostering reading achievement (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). For example, approximately 18% of individuals with no more than basic reading skills are employed in professional and business sectors of the economy as compared to 60% of individuals with proficient literacy skills (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007). Not surprisingly, adults with lower levels of literacy competencies earn significantly lower salaries than those with higher capability levels (Kutner, Greenberg, Jin, Boyle, Hsu, & Dunleavy, 2007). Economic well being is highly important; however, high levels of literacy are critically important for individual development, academic opportunities, career choices, and participation in society over a lifetime. In this light, a comprehensive review of empirical research and theory led Adams (1990) to conclude that reading “is the key to education, and education is the key to success for both individuals and a democratic society” (p. 13).

Despite the importance of literacy, there appears to be a decline in literacy among young Americans today. In this light, Bauerlein (2008; 2011) determined that excessive orientation toward video formats experienced by many children dampens the spirit and lulls creative instincts while eroding the context in which book reading is respected. Bauerlein further suggested that highly predictable and routine video oriented activities diminish

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thoughtful social and creative interaction. In addition, Bauerlein concluded that the video-oriented leisure habits of today's youth pull them ever further from their studies. In this light, Weil (2011) encouraged the practice of fostering participation of children and adults in spontaneous, engaging, and not so predictable activities. In comparing the messages of Bauerlein and Weil to what we have experienced, we have seen, all too often, children inundated with unimaginatively developed worksheets and excessive use of video slides. Narratives of school personnel relative to learning to read echo what Bauerlein and Weil suggested.

We believe that the development of reading skills relies largely on home environment, recruiting and retaining exceptional teachers, and providing appropriate educational support. Although the focus presented herein is on a laboratory K-12 school, we have found applications for the major strategy presented here applicable in a wide range of school settings. In addition, the leadership of school principals, assistant principals, and district office administrators is essential. Educators realize that reading proficiency enhances learning in all subjects. Although reading is taught in elementary schools, fostering reading competencies is generally not a focus in middle school and high school. Reading and writing are generally not taught as separate subjects past the eighth grade and content area teachers often do not feel they have either the time or the need to include reading instruction in their specific course content (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Moreover, school leaders might have little training in the teaching of reading and the other language arts before they are licensed by state agencies.

State departments of education work to establish reading standards while school district personnel strive to meet those standards. In this light, we want to determine what school leaders can do to enhance those efforts. We believe that when school leaders rekindle memories of how

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they learned to read, they will be more able and inclined to lead school literacy improvement efforts with greater enthusiasm. We have determined that encouraging school leaders to write a short memoir concerning how they, themselves, became readers can foster greater appreciation and understanding of literacy instruction.

School leaders play a vital role in providing the atmosphere and encouraging the pedagogical expertise that fosters reading proficiency at all levels of schooling. Effective school leaders are the ones who make literacy a school priority by impacting the development of leadership skills among faculty. Principals and district leaders are responsible for providing professional development opportunities that support school-wide literacy goals. They also have a direct impact on promoting school, community, and home partnerships. All of these efforts can positively support the development of reading proficiency in students at all levels.

We invited school leaders to write their story of reading and suggested the title “My Life as a Reader”. Modern social theory emphasizes the importance of story, often referred to as *narrative* in the research literature. Interpretation of story as an approach to understanding human development and changes in human behavior is widely encouraged. Experiences of humans all over the world are given expression through storytelling (White & Epston, 1990). Concerning literacy, Carlsen and Sherrill (1988) provided much evidence concerning the vital role of reading experiences in enhancing the lives of individuals, both from an academic and personal perspective. They established the link between early reading experiences and the development of confidence, competence, and a love of life-long reading. This is supported by the concept of self-efficacy developed by Bandura (1997, 2001) who determined that success is enhanced when learners see themselves as competent, capable, joyful participants in the world around them.

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The 40 school leaders in the context of this study are identified as principals, assistant principals, and district office administrators enrolled in leadership classes at the educational specialist and doctoral levels. The narrative format was chosen because we wanted to encourage thoughtful responses without the emotional and academic constraints of a formal paper. Our directions were deliberately vague because the goal was to identify factors that school leaders perceived as influential in the development of their reading competencies and attitudes toward reading. The only directions given were that the story had to be at least 500 words in length, typed, and clearly focused on the topic.

The primary question guiding our analysis was: What experiences were common to the school participants in this study relative to learning to read? We explored the depth of the common experiences and the influence on the school leaders' current reading habits. Analysis of the stories of those school leaders, all of whom considered themselves competent and enthusiastic readers, revealed common themes. We believe that these themes have implications for all school leaders, especially those who work with teachers and students in the primary and elementary grades. The three major themes presented below appeared in the writing of nearly all of the respondents.

1. A sense of emotional security and the development of positive, interpersonal relationships developed around books.
2. Books became a means of imaginative escape without distractions from technology.
3. The writers, as they gained competence, read to others encouraging the development of a stream of readers inspiring readers.

Most notable throughout the data is the influence of adult role models in fostering a love of reading, the sense of emotional security provided by reading, and the development of positive

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interpersonal relationships. Words such as *passion, love, immersed, mesmerized, and involved* were used to describe influential adults. Parents and grandparents were often cited as influential in the development of reading competencies and the love of reading. Common throughout the stories were accounts of school leaders being read to by their parents, and, in turn, reading aloud to their own children. Reading aloud was a critical factor in fostering enjoyment of books. The stories told by our school leaders confirm what researchers have been determining for a long time. For example, extensive review of research led The National Academy of Education (1984) to conclude that:

The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading is reading aloud to children. ... The benefits are greatest when the child is an active participant, engaging in discussions about stories, learning to identify letters and words, and talking about the meanings of words. (p. 23)

Many school leaders reported that their parents encouraged them to read aloud to them. Confirming what Durkin (1966) concluded, a nearly universal theme among participants is that early experiences with books and being read to by more competent readers fostered both their confidence and competence as readers. In addition, school leaders confirmed that “people begin developing knowledge that they will use to read during their earliest interactions with families and communities” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2004, p.1). School leaders reported that these reading experiences were shared experiences – adults read with the child, not to the child. This dynamic interaction between the child and adult enhanced the reading experience. Anecdotes were written about trips to book stores, book fairs, and libraries with a parent who not only loved to read, but recognized the importance of reading from an educational standpoint and the pleasure inherent in reading. Consequently, these school leaders indicated their desire to

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provide the same experiences for their children and grandchildren. For example, a school leader wrote:

My father is probably the one who influenced me the most in my love of reading. When I was small, he would read things to me that were way over my head: newspapers, horticulture articles, and Bible excerpts. Then he would explain what he had read to me. Later on, he would take me to the book store and buy me anything from comics to magazines to entire series of books. Often, he would read the books too and we would have in-depth discussions about the themes, characters, and meanings in the story. These are some of my fondest memories.

On the other hand, some of the school leaders did not develop interest in reading for pleasure until middle school or later. Alarming, many school leaders reported moving away from reading during their middle school and high school years. They cited compulsory reading of books which did not interest them and subsequent assignments that they often found tedious and uninspiring. For example:

“I found it difficult to have my reading choices dictated by the teacher.”

“I had a teacher who only let us read what she wanted us to read. I was interested in other things.”

The positive emotional connection between child and adult role model (whether parent, grandparent, or teacher) was reported in vivid terms. For example:

“My mother read to us before we were born.”

“I sat on my grandfather's lap as he read to me and I felt safe.”

“We knew the teacher loved us when she read aloud to us.”

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The feeling of security and love was also a factor in the desire to pass along the love of reading. One writer explained that she takes her daughter to bookstores just as her mother took her. Another writer recounted how she is exposing her son to the same books she read as a child.

I hope/believe that I have instilled that same love of reading in my own children (although they look at me like I'm crazy when I suggest they read the whole book through on the first day they receive it!). I buy my children books every year for Christmas presents, and at other times throughout the year.

Many writers stated that reading provided a means of escape from everyday life by allowing their imagination and curiosity to develop.

“As I grew older, books became a means of escape for me. Books allowed me to escape problems with health, relationships, and life in general.”

“I take pleasure in reading since I can envision myself as the characters in the book and compose my imagination with visions of what I think the storyline should be. Reading provides one the ability to create a chronicle in thought.”

The opportunity to have the time to read during childhood was attributed by several writers to the fact that television viewing time was strictly limited or virtually non-existent in the home. “Today, technologies such as television and video games have replaced reading. Why should children take the time to develop pictures from words when the images are there at their fingertips without any effort at all?”

The final theme we identified was of reciprocity: readers inspiring readers. School leaders explained the pleasure they receive when others are influenced by their reading choices. For example:

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“Some of my favorite childhood memories of my father are going to the book store together and having discussions about the *Hardy Boys* series, the *Nancy Drew* series, and the *Star Wars* series. Later on, during my teenage years, he introduced me to the *Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Knights of the Round Table* series, and *The Lord of the Rings* series. He even broadened his own horizons by tolerating my teenage fascination with horror writers like Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Ann Rice. He read several books by these authors, just so we could discuss them together – and we still do that and I still treasure those times. This past semester, my father read *Leadership Strategies of Attila the Hun* after I told him I was reading it for a class.”

Implications and Conclusions

Our goal was to identify factors that encouraged school leaders to learn to read and enhance their competencies as they became more established readers. Insights gained through memories and writing about how they learned to read are highly valuable in informing school leaders as they lead and support literacy initiatives in schools. In other words, experiences in learning to read inform theory. The link between early reading experiences and the development of confidence, competence, and a love of life-long reading has been established (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988). This study can encourage school leaders to write their own My Life as a Reader memoir and, in turn, reflect on their story as it relates to the reading program in their schools. In this light, school leaders might more clearly understand the problems of some struggling/reluctant readers who, more than likely, did not enjoy abundant early opportunities to experience a print rich environment or encouragement from interested adults.

Not surprisingly, school leaders' perceptions of learning to read reflect what Rasinski (2010) described as scaffolding experiences. Through scaffolding, a more competent reader

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models, encourages, and provides opportunities for a developing reader to move from total dependence on the more competent reader to independent reading. For example, one writer recalled:

“When I was about three or four years old my parents gave me a copy of a book called *Leo the Late Bloomer*. I remember asking to hear “Leo” night after night at bedtime and eventually I wanted to read it to my parents. I could look at the pictures and tell the story. I loved the pictures and still have a copy of this great book.”

It is interesting to note, for most of these school leaders, the influence of school was not the primary factor in fostering interest and early competence in learning to read and enjoying reading as a lifelong activity. One writer summed up her experiences as follows:

“The art of learning to read often happens without the reader’s knowledge. It’s almost as if one goes to sleep one night being a nonreader and wakes up the next morning with all the skills needed to be a reader. Thinking back over my life about when and how I learned to read, I really cannot remember the exact time. Learning to read just seemed to happen. I understand that through phonemic awareness, sight word recognition, and lots of practice, I was able to learn to read. However, *learning to read and becoming a reader are two different things.*”

Most of the writers emphasized the influence of interested adults, usually parents, but often grandparents, in fostering a love of books, interest in reading, and the social climate that made reading seem to be a highly worthwhile endeavor. On the other hand, there were some writers who largely credited a teacher for inspiring them to want to read. This was usually the result of a teacher reading engaging material in a classroom setting. Virtually all of the writers describe learning to enjoy listening to books being read aloud in a comfortable social setting,

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whether at home or in a school environment. This evidence is not surprising and is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) findings concerning the influence of positive social interaction for enhancing cognitive development among children.

Overall analysis of findings suggests that much support must be provided to young children in learning to read and appreciate literature. The writers, all successful learners, emphasized the importance of early positive experiences with books and socially positive interaction with more competent readers. Please see Appendix A for a full-length memoir. This writer chose to emphasize the relationship between reading and writing. The writers generally indicated that because of their early experiences they were confident that they would be successful upon entering school. The authors further suggest that all school leaders be encouraged to write their own story about how they became readers. In addition, this activity can be a valuable and entertaining school in-service project that encourages reflection as well as community building within the school.

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Appendix A

My Life as a Reader and Writer

Because I am the youngest of four children in my family, their influence on my early reading was remarkable. It wasn't because they read to me or did any number of things that others have said their siblings did to help them be early reader. They began school when parents had to buy text books for their children, so we had stacks of basal readers in our home. These books came in very handy once I had mastered the initial skills of reading. Learning to read actually came about for me through writing.

My oldest brother joined the Army just before I turned four. He was my absolute favorite and I was crushed when he went off to boot camp. Long distance telephone calls were very expensive in the early '50s, so we were seldom able to speak to each other. Letter writing was the way to go. I knew I couldn't write a letter, but he encouraged me to try. At first, I just scribbled—shorthand—as he called it and he assured me that he could understand it. But, I started to notice that he didn't always answer my many questions, so the doubts set in.

The previous Christmas I had received a chalkboard easel with the alphabet painted across the top so I had already mastered writing the A-B-Cs. With that skill I approached my mother about helping me write “real” letters to my brother. She provided me with a small cardboard-backed paper pad and pencils. Armed with my implements, I followed her from room to room in the house and outside to the garden or wherever she was working. So I could be comfortable and stay out of the dirt, I carried along my tiny stool, plopped it down within ear shot of Mama, and proceeded to ask, “How do you spell...?” Sometimes within a short span of time, I would ask her to spell a word the second time. When that happened she did the absolutely guaranteed thing to teach any child to read. She responded, “I've already spelled that for you. Go back and re-read your letter and find that word.” And I did. Soon I was looking in those basal readers for the spelling of words I wanted to put into letters for my brother.

I never really learned phonics, but I had the longest list of mastered “sight” words my first grade teacher had ever seen, and I could write above average sentences. Now I believe that the skill of writing should come before reading and the secret to good writing is finding the child's interest and purpose. I see this philosophy in effective writing/reading programs such as Reggie Routman's Writing Essentials. And I am still appalled that states want to test our students' ability to write with canned prompts that resonate with few children. Purpose and audience, people, purpose and audience!!