

A SCHOOL OF READERS

Building a Reading Culture

by Jean Lawrence

Providing access to a rich library of books is one thing, getting young people to read and enjoy it is another. It's all about engagement—engaging our children in the joy and the power of reading for pleasure.

If you Google the word *literacy*, you get approximately 37,200,000 hits; the *importance of literacy*—1,120,000 hits; and *how to get teenagers to read*—69,000,000 hits. There is no question, reading and literacy are parental concerns and educational focuses in North America. Students have plenty of opportunity to read in school; there are textbooks and assigned readings in most classes. But what about the value of recreational reading? What place does this have in schools? Research clearly indicates the importance of recreational reading to language and literacy development, leading to such skills as increased vocabulary, more accurate spelling and a more sophisticated comprehension of sentence structure. Stephen Krashen describes the effectiveness of free reading: “children become better readers by reading.” Specifically, he states that those children “who don’t read for pleasure have an extremely tough time developing the language and literacy competencies necessary to succeed in today’s world.”

It was such questions and the desire to create a school of readers that lead me to co-author, with Maryam Moayeri, three new resources. The idea behind the resources was to compile quizzes for hundreds of books, offering students choice, and teachers convenience. The book quizzes are an easy way of allowing the teachers to ascertain that students have read and understood the books (i.e., comprehension of plot, character, etc.). The tests are not complicated but comprehensive, and are mostly movie proof (i.e., if students watch the movie instead of reading the book, the tests would prove difficult).

How We Got Started With An Independent Reading Program

The goal of this reading program is not centred around completion of tasks, but is instead about establishing life-long readers. English teacher

Wanting to introduce as many students as possible to the joy of reading, two English teachers approached me in the Spring of 2003 to assist them with starting up an independent reading program. They had just been to a workshop given by Maryam, had each purchased her resource *Independent Minds Independent Readers*, and were inspired to implement a

similar program at our school. Beginning with the test bank in Maryam’s book and a commitment to adding more tests, we introduced the program to three classes in September 2004. Gradually, the program grew and now there are eleven English teachers participating in the program and over 1050 students (approximately half the school population). The program is used with grades 8 – 12, including some second language classes. This program has been a resounding success, with the library tripling its fiction circulation within the first three years.

How We Run The Program

Starting with booktalks generates excitement and interest—I want to read all the books that Jean talks about myself! English teacher

At the beginning of the school year, a month or so is set aside to introduce the program to all classes participating. Each of the classes is scheduled into the library for booktalks and to browse the collection. Booktalks at the beginning of the program generate interest and excitement among both students and teachers. The library has at least one copy of each of the books on the reading list. The books are all set aside on carts and held on reserve until all of the classes have had a chance to look them over. Students, of course, are free to start reading a copy from home or borrowing from elsewhere. The students receive a title list for the year and are instructed to check the library website for new titles added throughout the year. The list is dynamic, with new titles added regularly by interested teachers. On average, four titles are added monthly with the result that the list increases by about forty titles each year. Once all classes have been introduced to the books, they are released for borrowing—one per student at first. Teachers may choose to start the program at the beginning of the year or join later.

Our independent reading program is run out of the library. I organize all the quizzes, the addition of new titles, the updated reading lists, etc. I believe that it is essential that the teacher-librarian be involved in the implementation of this program, although not necessarily be the person running it. Teacher-librarians, as literacy leaders, are in a perfect position to support the reading needs and desires of the students. This team approach supports the English teacher as well. Each lunch hour our library is a frenzy of students seeking new reading material. We take suggestions, we look at what students are reading, we purchase student requests and we read, read, read what the students are

reading. I provide suggestions to the teachers involved, upon request, of what to read and add to the list. The teachers are in charge of student sign-up for the tests, as well as administering and marking the tests. Each teacher sets their own criteria for student success. One teacher notes: *be careful not to establish requirements that are too lofty—good readers will readily read 10 books a term, the real excitement comes from having poor students read 2 – 3 books!* Last year, one of the teachers used the test bank for bonus marks. If students wanted to increase their percentages, the teacher would say *read a book!*

And finally, each June, the teachers involved meet over lunch and goodies for a debriefing, to share their planned summer reading for the program, to talk about any issues or challenges that have arisen during the year and to celebrate the success of the program.

Three New Publications

About two years ago, Maryam and I jointly presented Maryam’s published resource, *Independent Minds Independent Readers*, and my success with the program at a literacy conference in Vancouver. Through that event and our mutual enthusiasm for and commitment to literacy, we decided to collaborate on another publication. That idea has resulted in three exciting new publications entitled *A School of Readers*: one with an elementary focus, one with a secondary focus, and one for Canadian literature (see ad page 21). We use all of the book titles in the three publications, except the picture books at the high school level. The variety of reading selections, including some non-fiction, and multiple levels appeals to everyone—students can challenge themselves at their own pace. Students are talking about the books they read, sharing with their friends and classmates and reading books that they might not otherwise have picked up. Many reluctant readers are encouraged by seeing their peers enjoying and talking about the books they are reading, and successes abound.

I’ve never seen my child read a book before, and now I see him reading every day.

Parent, speaking with an English teacher

Reference

Krashen, Stephen. “Free Reading.” *School Library Journal*. Sept. 2006: 42-45. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 15 January 2010.

Jean Lawrence (a pseudonym) has been a teacher-librarian for 27 years in two large high schools in Vancouver, BC. She is a voracious reader who loves her job.

