

# *The Power of Choice: Supporting Independent Readers*

*“Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him.”*

— **MAYA ANGELOU**

**L**ifelong readers have strong reading preferences and can self-select books successfully (Miller, 2013). When they visit a library or bookstore, they possess the knowledge and experience to preview and evaluate books and select books meeting their reading needs and interests. They didn’t develop those abilities overnight—it took a lifetime of looking at books, making book choices, and reflecting on their reading experiences.

If we want children and teens to become lifelong readers, they need to practice and fine-tune their book-selection skills, too. Allowing them to choose the texts increases their reading motivation and interest (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling & Mazzoni, 1996; Worthy & McKool, 1996; Wigfield, et al., 2014). When children begin selecting their own books to read, many adults worry that they will make “inappropriate” book choices or select books that don’t feed their reading development. Yes, many students struggle with making wise book choices. But we can help them by modeling how to preview and evaluate books and challenge themselves as readers.



See Donalyn and Colby discuss free choice for independent reading at [scholastic.com/GameChangerResources](https://www.scholastic.com/GameChangerResources)

Some educators question the importance of choice reading in the classroom. Burdened with curriculum demands, they feel that they do not have time to foster students' personal reading lives or that they lack school-community support for doing so. However, emphasizing academic reading over personal reading is shortsighted and undermines students' long-term literacy development. Self-selected reading is more powerful than teacher-selected reading in developing motivation and comprehension (Guthrie, et al., 2007). According to reading researcher Richard Allington, "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" (2014). Practice doesn't make perfect—practice makes permanent, and if we want students to internalize all of the knowledge and skills we teach them, we need to give them significant time to practice what they are learning in the context of real reading events.

Promoting students' personal ownership of reading ensures they will develop the literacy skills and attitudes about literacy they need to be successful now and in the future.

## **The Benefits of Self-Selected Reading**

When we give children and teens lots of opportunities to self-select books, we help them practice the skills and habits they need to become independent readers. When young readers choose what they read, it builds agency and confidence, and they are more likely to develop a positive orientation toward reading and stronger reading ability (Johnson & Blair, 2003). In this section, we discuss other benefits of giving children choices in what they read.

### **Students Come to Value Their Decision-Making Process**

We want children to develop the ability to make their own decisions. When they are young, we often frame choices in binary terms: make "good" choices instead of "bad" ones. We give them choices that require a simple a "yes" or "no" answer. Nuanced decision-making isn't so clear cut. We often consider several variables before making a choice such as where we might live or whether to accept a particular job. Giving children free choice sometimes doesn't mean we cede control of all decision-making to them; it should be an incremental process that becomes more complex with age and maturity (Taylor, 2009).

Encouraging young readers to select their own books from time to time fosters their autonomy and communicates your respect for their choices. When we consider the life-changing decisions children will face as they grow up, choosing a book offers a low-risk opportunity to practice sophisticated decision making.



## Students Learn to Choose Appropriate Reading Material

It takes time to learn strategies and develop book selection skills. The best way to nurture the process is to spend a lot of time with students looking at books, selecting books to read, reading them, and reflecting on the whole process. Urge them to ask themselves, “What appealed to me about this book in the first place? Was this a good book choice for me? Why or why not? Did this book provide what I was looking for this time? How did this book change me as a reader or person?” Children need lots of modeling, encouragement, and support to make wise book choices. No matter our personal reading preferences and opinions, we must celebrate whatever they choose to read and offer guidance when they have questions about books and their reading experiences.

Colby’s student, Chandler, was committed to reading Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet*, even though it was too difficult for him to comprehend. Colby helped Chandler realize that the book was not the best choice for him now, but would be if he worked on building his reading skill. Chandler kept *Hatchet* in his desk and would pull it out every couple of months and try to read it. By the end of the year, Chandler was able to comprehend and enjoy *Hatchet*, and to gain reading confidence.

If Colby had forbidden Chandler from reading *Hatchet*, or shamed him for trying to read it, Chandler would have probably quit and decided he wasn’t a good reader. Reading a book Chandler wanted to read was never a question; Colby always framed his discussions so that Chandler believed he would eventually be able to read not only *Hatchet*, but any book he wanted to read. There’s a big difference between being unable to read a book right now and never being able to read it. Chandler’s desire to build his skills until he could read *Hatchet* drove his interest in reading all year.

## Students Gain Confidence and a Feeling of Ownership

Empowering children to select their own books feeds their self-esteem as readers and decision makers. Conversely, when we restrict and control book choices, we discourage children from reading for their own purposes and to make their own decisions. Lifelong readers develop personal reading preferences and tastes over time, and discover reasons for reading that matter to them. It is unlikely that young readers will develop internal reading motivation if all their choices sit outside of them.

You can see confidence develop over a school year when children participate in nourishing, low-judgment reading communities that support and value their choices. At the beginning of the year, many students depend on their teachers or librarian for book recommendations because they don't have much experience choosing their own books, they don't see themselves as capable readers and therefore lack confidence, or they don't believe their teachers will approve of the books they choose. We have witnessed this metamorphosis from dependent reader to independent reader every year. With the right support, young readers can develop the confidence and experience they need to choose books for themselves long after leaving your class.

One of Donalyn's sixth graders, Katie, was reading at grade level, and Donalyn knew she was capable of reading books accessible to most sixth graders. So when



Katie told Donalyn that she wanted to read Beverly Cleary's *Ramona the Brave*, Donalyn didn't tell Katie that the book was too easy for her. Instead, she talked with Katie about why she chose the book in the first place. Katie said, "I know you told us we could read whatever we want, but I don't know what to read. I read this series in second grade and they were the last books I remember liking." Donalyn decided that Katie was overwhelmed with free choice, and needed lots of opportunities to preview books she might be interested in reading, as well as the chance to share and discuss books with other kids in class. With encouragement and practice choosing books, Katie's confidence grew over time.

## Students Become Better Test Takers

Children read more when they self-select their books. They stick with books longer and apply every reading strategy they know to navigate those books. Reading volume is the key to reading achievement (Krashen, 2004). If students don't read much, their reading test scores won't improve, no matter much we "prepare" them for those tests. The more children read and the more widely they read, the higher their test scores.

Giving kids choice in what they read drives more reading and strong reading skills. Achievement is driven by interest.

## Students Become Lifelong Readers

We are more likely to engage in activities when we find them personally meaningful. When children choose their own books to read, they develop an attachment to reading and discover that reading is entertaining, edifying, comforting, and inspiring. The goal of all teaching is leading children to independence. What can we model and teach today that young readers can use for a lifetime? We often ask ourselves when evaluating a strategy, computer program, or activity, "Do readers really do this?" If the answer is no, why are we wasting time teaching it?

## What Choice Is and What It Isn't

Choice reading doesn't look the same from one school or classroom to the next. In some schools, children's choices are strictly limited and controlled. Students must select books from specific text level ranges, teacher-created lists, or district curriculum guides. Sometimes, educators prevent older students from reading illustrated texts, such as graphic novels and picture books, or series fiction because they aren't considered "rigorous" enough. Donalyn visited an elementary school where each child was told to select a book "at their level" for classroom work and a "dessert" book from the library for their own reading enjoyment, as if that reading was frivolous and without academic value. Whether we mean to or not, when we categorize texts in this way, we communicate to children that their personal reading interests aren't as important as our expectations for what and when they read. Too often, adults complain that kids don't read enough, then bemoan their reading choices when they do. We can't have it both ways.

Fourth-grade teacher Stacey Riedmiller has witnessed educators removing favorite books and series from their classroom libraries because students were reading them over and over instead of trying other books. Stacey recognizes that young readers often find comfort in and gain confidence from rereading books.

#### CHANGE IN ACTION



**Stacey Riedmiller**

### **The Rewards of Rereading**

*When children choose to reread a book series, they add dimensions to their understanding of that series.*

When children choose to revisit a book, they know the characters, they know the setting, and they know that everything will be all right in the end. This offers comfort, in a time when so many of our kids need comforting.

Last year, I had a reading conference with a student who was reading the Amulet series by Kazu Kibuishi for the second time. I asked him if he had found any new treasures this time around. His answer should bring joy to any educator's heart: "The first time I read through, I read with my brain. This time, I am reading with my heart." I understood just what he meant. If I had discouraged that child from rereading the series, and told him he needed to find something new, it would have been a missed opportunity.

Our responsibility is to encourage our students to read widely from different genres, eras, formats, topics, and perspectives. Offering children meaningful opportunities to choose, while ensuring they grow as readers, requires negotiation between academic and personal reading goals. Readers' unique needs and interests should be the primary drivers of independent reading and matter more than mandates and expectations of teachers and caregivers. If we want students to take ownership of reading, we have to give it to them—even when their book choices aren't successful or don't match our expectations.



## Guided Choice

Taking developing readers to the library and letting them pick whatever they want doesn't provide them with enough guidance, however. Many young readers do not know how to preview books and determine whether one is a good match for their abilities and interests. Don't presume that a fourth grader knows how to select a library book. Don't presume that an eighth grader knows. Some don't. According to the 2016 Scholastic Kids and Family Reading Report, 41 percent of the children surveyed reported that their parents and teachers underestimate how hard it is for them to find books to read. The more children select books and read lots of them, the easier finding books becomes: 57 percent of infrequent readers struggle with book selection, while only 26 percent of frequent readers do (Scholastic, 2016).



Children need modeling and support from adults, and lots of opportunities to preview, share, and talk about books with their reading community peers, in order to become capable book selectors. Unfortunately, the current nationwide focus on high-stakes testing leaves few opportunities for students to read self-selected books at school, which means they aren't getting much instruction or support on how to choose books.

So what's the middle ground between controlling book choice and giving children free rein? How can we teach and model authentic ways to choose books while honoring students' needs for self-determination and agency? It takes intentional focus and time, as well as rituals and routines.

## Rituals and Routines

Rituals and routines, the actions we habitually follow and behaviors we exhibit, can provide support, comfort, guidance, and ways of connecting with others. They reflect our cultural and personal beliefs and priorities. At the beginning of the school year, we teachers create learning rituals and routines in an effort to build successful learning communities. We structure them to reinforce our beliefs about literacy. We set the tone. We communicate the value system at work.

At a recent Scholastic National Reading Summit, Dr. Ernest Morrell described rituals through “temporal, spatial, and status” lenses (Morrell, 2017). In language arts classrooms, what do we make time for? What do we make space for? What do we give status to? What temporal, spatial, and status needs might we consider as we develop our rituals and routines?

## **TIME**

**How do students spend their time in language arts class?**

- **What is the balance between teacher-directed instruction and student-directed inquiry and practice?**
- **Do children spend meaningful time every day reading, writing, and talking about topics of their own choice?**
- **Is there regular, dedicated time for reading aloud?**
- **How much time do we invest in family literacy education?**

## **SPACE**

**How do I organize our physical and intellectual spaces?**

- **Do we create spaces for students to share and discuss with one another what they’re reading and writing?**
- **Does reading play a prominent visible role across our school?**
- **What are our curricular priorities?**
- **How do social justice, service learning, information literacy, critical thinking, and collaboration run through every subject?**
- **Do we create welcoming spaces for all families?**

## **STATUS**

**How do we decide what to emphasize or elevate?**

- **Do we budget for enough books and resources in libraries and classrooms?**
- **Do our institutional and instructional structures and behaviors perpetuate stereotypes and social/cultural inequities, or do they seek to dismantle them?**
- **Do we bestow privileges on certain students while withholding them from others?**
- **Do we celebrate and incorporate diversity throughout the school year, or only during holidays and designated months?**
- **Do we value students’ test scores more than their reading lives?**
- **Do we value home literacy as much as school literacy?**



The rituals and routines around reading that we implement at school and home, as well as our conversations about them, communicate what we value about reading and readers. What reading identities do our rituals and routines enforce? Are we leading our children toward healthy lifelong reading habits, empathy, and intellectual curiosity, or a life without books and reading?



Setting aside daily reading time is an important routine because it supports children's reading engagement and development. Providing regular opportunities for children to preview, share, and talk about books does, too.

## Book Talking and Book Pass

The rituals and routines we create to celebrate reading (and readers) should change from year to year in response to our students and their unique needs. Two practices we consistently use year after year are book talking and book passes, because they support and celebrate our students' reading engagement and effort.

### Book Talking

The only thing readers enjoy almost as much as reading is talking about books with other readers. Have you ever finished a book and felt compelled to put it in another reader's hands, with the plea, "I need you to read this book so that we can talk about it"? Creating a culture of reading at school and home includes lots of opportunities for young readers to share and talk about books with one another (Atwell & Merkel, 2016).

It's true that some readers prefer to invest more time in relationships with people inside their books than in face-to-face relationships with others, but discussions with other readers about books enhance reading lives.

When Donalyn began teaching, she assigned book reports to her students because all of the teachers on her team did. It didn't take Donalyn long to see how detrimental

that was. Some of her students wouldn't read much until right before the book report was due. With the deadline looming, those students flew down to the library, picked out the shortest book they could find (*Sarah, Plain and Tall* at only 64 pages), skimmed the book or Googled it, wrote a passable report, then returned to not reading.

The goal of a book report is for students to prove to their teacher that they read a book, and we know kids can cobble together a book report without reading much. If all motivators for reading are external and punitive—and come from adults and are graded or evaluated—students' intrinsic motivation and their reading identity development fall by the wayside.

Recognizing the flaws of book reports, many educators have moved away from them in favor of book talks, short commercials about books. Book talks provide authentic persuasive speaking and writing opportunities by mirroring ways that readers share and recommend books to one another. The goal of a book talk is to convince other readers to read a book.

### **Preparing for a Book Talk**

Book talking begins with every adult in the school: teachers book talking in class, librarians book talking during library visits and school programs, administrators book talking during announcements or sharing book recommendations, as principals Brad, LaQuita, and Sue have described in this book. This creates a book-talking culture in the school.

Set aside two or three minutes each day to book talk a few books to your class. Allow book talks to happen spontaneously, too, when you are helping kids browse books in the school or classroom library. Book talks for groups of students should have broad appeal, while book talks for individual students should appeal to their individual abilities and interests. As former middle school teacher and children's author Kate Messner reminds us, "Book talking and individualized book recommendations are key to sustaining a classroom where every child is a reader" (Messner, 2016). Book talking builds relationships between and among readers.

Don't stress yourself out about book talking. It's not any different than sharing your thoughts about a favorite song or television show. Heartfelt testimonials work best. It doesn't have to be a production.

If you want to write some notes about the book in preparation, go ahead. But the best way to get ready for a book talk is to read the book. Your honest enthusiasm for it will inspire kids to read it. If you don't have time to read the book, research reviews and online resources and share them with students. Consider interesting ways to introduce the book. Share a book trailer. Connect the book to

other books by the same author or in the same genre. Read an excerpt such as the first chapter, an exciting scene, a fascinating two-page spread from a nonfiction book, or a few poems. Colby struggled to find good examples of book talks on YouTube, so he decided to record at least one a week for his own channel.

## Encouraging Student-Led Book Talks

No matter our book-talking skill, the best readers to give students book recommendations are their peers. Who knows more about what seventh graders like to read more than another seventh grader? When we provide students with regular opportunities to recommend books, we foster reading relationships among our students that support them long after they leave our classrooms.

A month into the school year, Hailey came to class gushing about Gordon Korman's *Restart*. "Mr. Sharp, have you read this book? It is amazing. I stayed up super late last night, and I almost finished it."

"I have not read it yet. Thanks for the recommendation," Colby replied. The look Hailey gave him signaled that she was disappointed in him for not having read the book. She walked away without responding, sat down on one of our classroom couches, and began reading. Later, Colby was sitting on the carpet conferring with a student when he noticed Hailey talking to her friend, Reese. Colby couldn't hear what they were talking about, but at the end of their conversation, Reese took *Restart* and put it in her book box.

The following Monday, Reese asked Colby if she could give a book talk during their regular book-talking time—snack break. Then Colby asked Reese what book she wanted to talk, to which she replied, "I read this amazing book called *Restart* over the weekend. Kids in this class are going to love it. Have you read it?" Colby shook his head and smiled.

Reese gave an amazing book talk that morning, and a few kids added *Restart* to their to-read list. Reese passed the book to Russell, and Russell finished the book later that week.

Months later, with only a handful of days left in the school year, Tobin came up to Colby and told him that the previous night he got his very own library card. Colby had been talking a lot in class about ways to get books during the summer, and a bunch of his students expressed interest in getting library cards. Colby was so excited for Tobin. They talked about the card-acquisition process, the library itself, and the books Tobin had checked out, including *Restart*. Tobin said he knew other kids had been talking about it, so it was probably a book he would enjoy reading.

You can find abundant book-talking resources online, or you and your students can record your own book talks and share them with readers year to year. We see all sorts of creative ways to celebrate and share books that include students' voices, such as posting book talks on Flipgrid and/or Padlet, or recording them for a school news show.

Book talking supports readers in the moment and down the road. Students celebrate books they've enjoyed while earmarking books they might read next. Book talking honors their voices, recognizes their reading experiences and preferences, and keeps their reading momentum going.

## **Book Pass**

Have you ever felt certain books in your classroom or library were not receiving the love they deserve? Have you ever wondered why students ignore an amazing book? Have you ever struggled to add a bunch of new books to your classroom library all at once? Do your students overlook incredible books and series because they aren't new? Giving students regular opportunities to preview books they might miss can spark interest in reading them and expand students' reading choices and book knowledge.

Book pass (Allen, 2000), speed dating with books, book tastings... no matter what you call it, the process is similar. Teachers and librarians collect stacks of books they think their students might be interested in reading. Those books might include titles for units of study in science and social studies, genres students don't read enough, authors with high appeal, new books, older books—any books you think would enrich students' reading experiences. Determine your goals when selecting books and work with colleagues and your librarian to find as many as possible.

## **Preparing for a Book Pass**

There are different ways to manage book passes, but the basic sequence remains the same. You begin by stacking books on tables or stations around your room or library. Be sure to offer many books for each student. You can organize students into groups randomly or by reading interests or goals. Then invite students to spend a few minutes looking at the books—reading the blurb on the back cover or jacket flap, browsing the illustrations, and/or sampling a few pages. Ask students to record any titles that interest them on their to-read lists in their reader's notebooks. After the book pass, create reserve lists for any hot titles and let students check out books. Reunite as a group to celebrate and share the books you have discovered.

Colby stacks 20 to 50 books in different stations around his classroom, and students travel from station to station, previewing books at each station for 6 to 10

## Book Pass Basics

1. **Select books.**
2. **Place books at each book pass station.**
3. **Organize students into groups.**
4. **Model how to preview a book and record entries on a to-read list.**
5. **Give students a set time to travel through each book pass station.**
6. **As a group, share titles students are excited to read.**

minutes. When Colby calls time, he encourages students to select one or two books they want to read immediately and take them to the next station.

After students have made it through all of the stations, Colby encourages students who haven't found a book to revisit stations. Once everyone has found books to add to their to-read lists and book boxes, the class gathers in the meeting area and shares some of the titles they discovered.

Donalyn organizes book passes differently, shortening the time students spend looking at each book before passing on it and creating hold lists for high-demand books, but her goals and results are the same as Colby's.

Our best advice: keep moving; don't spend too much time looking at the same stack of books; include as many voices, genres, and formats in stacks as possible; and figure out how to fairly distribute books that seem the most popular with kids. No matter how you organize your book pass, don't lose sight of your purpose for doing it: to introduce students to a host of books they might read and to encourage conversations between and among students about books.

### When You Need a Book Pass

Try a book pass when you feel your students need more exposure to books they might read:

#### Before a school break

Hosting a book pass before breaks sends the message that school vacations offer opportunities for students to read books of their choice. To increase motivation and

ensure access, browse books with students and select some to read over the break, then send them home with those books.

### **When kids are reading the same books over and over**

We love it when students fall in love with a series, author, or genre. There is nothing like watching a child devour the entire Harry Potter series or discover Jason Reynolds and read all of his books. However sometimes those children struggle to jump into other series, authors, and genres, and their reading motivation and enthusiasm flags.

Readers benefit from taking a break from reading a large series or reading one author or genre at the exclusion of others. Colby's student Reese enthusiastically read the first five books in Tui T. Sutherland's *Wings of Fire* series, but lost her reading steam halfway through book six. During a book pass, she discovered Lauren Wolk's *Wolf Hollow* and read it over Thanksgiving break. When school resumed, Reese declared, "*Wolf Hollow* is the best book I've read all year," and pleaded for everyone to read it. Then she jumped back into the *Wings of Fire* series with renewed energy.

### **When new books are added to the classroom library**

While we try to book talk individual new books before adding them to our classroom libraries throughout the year, there are moments when we want students to look at a lot of new books at once. Book passes provide opportunities to explore many titles in one sitting.

Each year Colby's school district budgets \$250 for teachers to spend on their classroom libraries. Because Colby always wants to use the money strategically, he waits until he gets to know his students each year before spending it. He wants the books he purchases to reflect his students' interests and needs, and fill any gaps in his collection. Giving students a chance to preview new books before classmates begin checking them out helps students keep track of the ones they want to read, before they disappear from the library.

### **When old favorites are being overlooked**

The popularity of certain books changes from one year to the next. This year, you have a lot of soccer players and Star Wars fans; next year, everyone wants to read about dragons or World War II. Books that fly off the shelves one year can gather dust the next. Book passes are great ways to get some old favorites in front of new readers.

### **To introduce kids to authors they don't know**

Don't assume children know much about authors who write books for them. Colby was shocked to discover early one year that none of his fourth graders had read a Beverly

Cleary book. So he dedicated an entire station to Cleary books during a book pass, and the Ramona books and *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* became popular reads. Bring in additional books by authors kids meet through read-alouds or units of study. When kids find authors they like, it almost always sparks a desire to read more.

### To introduce kids to genres and formats they aren't reading

When children avoid certain genres or formats, we assume they haven't had positive, engaging experiences reading them (Miller, 2013). What books do students avoid reading or claim they dislike? Book passes give students time to preview and choose books they might not approach on their own. Colby struggled to encourage his students to read poetry. Adding multiple copies of Kwame Alexander's *The Crossover* and *Booked* to a book pass station changed his students' perceptions of poetry, and those books got passed from one student to the next.

## How Do We Find a Book to Read?

Concerned that her middle schoolers often struggled with choosing library books, Donalyn worked with them to identify the book selection skills they needed.

Upon returning to the classroom from a weekly library visit, Donalyn gave students a few minutes to share the books they just checked out. "I know everyone is excited about the new books you found today. I am curious. How did you decide that book was the book you were checking out today? How did you discover it? How did you know it was a good book for you?"

Students chatted with their table partners for a few minutes, then Donalyn invited students to share how they selected their library books. Alex said, "I got the next Amulet, the sixth one. I have already read the rest of the series, and I cannot wait to read this one!" He held the graphic novel over his head for emphasis, sparking cheers from several classmates who enjoyed this fantasy series, too.





Donalyn started a list on the whiteboard titled, “Ways to Find a Book to Read” and wrote “series” next to the first bullet. “How many of you picked your book today because it’s part of a series you enjoy?” Several hands shot up.

Next, Destiny shared that she checked out a nonfiction book on dogs she hadn’t read. Hailey chose *Ghetto Cowboy* by Greg Neri, another book from that year’s Bluebonnet Award reading list. She planned to read all 20 books on the list. Heavenly checked out *One for the Murphys* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt because several of her friends told her it was “amazing.” Riley admitted that she picked a short book because she had a lot of soccer games that week, while Skylar selected a long fantasy book because she knew she was going on a road trip to her grandmother’s house in Austin and needed something to read in the car so she, in her words, “wouldn’t have to look at cows out the window the whole time!”

Donalyn added “topic,” “book list,” “length,” and “recommendations” to the class-created list. Then everyone spent a few minutes discussing the people who gave them book suggestions—teachers, librarian, friends, family members, and so on. Finally, Donalyn invited each child to show off his or her book and describe how it was chosen. In a few minutes, Donalyn and her students had generated this list:

- Series
- Format (graphic novels, short stories, books of lists, etc.)
- Cover (We joke about not choosing a book by its cover, but we do.)
- Topic
- Award or Book List
- Reviews
- To-Read List
- Recommendations
- Read the blurb
- Read a few pages
- Skim the table of contents or visuals
- Length

After celebrating everyone’s book choices, Donalyn invited her students to try a new method for choosing a book the next time they needed one. “If you chose a book today because the cover looked interesting, next time, get a recommendation from a friend or open the book and read a few pages. Think about different ways to look at books to decide if they look good to you.” Over time, students built greater capacity to evaluate books and identify ones they would like to read.

Introducing students to different formats or platforms such as ebooks and audiobooks can increase their reading engagement and interest. Antero Garcia shares his experiences using audiobooks and multimodal texts in written, oral, and visual formats to entice adolescents to read more. Respecting students' reading choices includes honoring how they access texts. All reading counts in an inclusive reading community!

### CHANGE IN ACTION



**Antero Garcia**

## **Audiobooks, Interactive Media, and What Counts as Reading**

To make a class novel more accessible to all of my students one year, I installed an unabridged audiobook version of it on all of their digital devices. Some students complained that listening to a book is “boring,” so Solomon, a serious-minded classmate, stated, “You just gotta listen. You can’t do anything else.” He then paused before concluding, “It’s like reading.”

I’ve spent a lot of time reflecting on Solomon’s words and reimagining what “counts” when it comes to cultivating passionate readers. Throughout the remainder of that school year, students often used earphones during silent reading time. Audiobooks were appreciated side-by-side with traditional print-based novels, comic books, manga, and magazines in the classroom.

That isn’t to say letting Solomon and his classmates use their headphones went perfectly. The tinny warble of music spewing from headphones sometimes distracted classmates, and we observed students swiping and tapping on video games. Some students were *not* listening to audiobooks, in other words. However, these incidents point to two tensions that can emerge when teachers broaden what “counts” as reading in our classrooms:

- 1.** Multimodal reading of text doesn’t look like the reading that teachers are used to assessing and supporting.
- 2.** Using digital resources in classrooms requires trust between teachers and students.

Though we have miles to go, we are getting closer to a more robust understanding of “reading”; even textbook companies are savvy enough to

begin packaging multimodal resources with the books. At the same time, I recognize that there are cognitive differences between reading with your eyes, listening to the same text, and watching an interactive story come into being through a gaming console. However, these differences must be reconciled with meaningful expectations of comprehension. Just as I was able to see many of my students discover the joys of reading by encouraging them to read comic books, Solomon reminds us that there are myriad students who may be itching to become active and joyful readers if we encourage them to plug into texts in different ways.

At the same time, trust between students and teacher is important. Allowing students to listen privately—something that teachers may not be able to monitor—means reimagining how texts, students, and teachers interact. If we're taking an honest look at classrooms today, we must acknowledge the frequent cat-and-mouse game of teachers "catching" students in the act of texting, playing, or otherwise being distracted by their phones. As we reimagine the role of technology in the lives of young readers, we must also reimagine what trust *means* around that technology as well. How I consume media today looks vastly different than it did when I was in school. I still have a pile of books next to my bedside that I work through ever so slowly, and some of these books are queued up on a Kindle rather than in physical form. I spend a lot of time listening to audiobooks and podcasts. I have also spent a lot of time studying and playing interactive fiction and games that offer narrative fulfillment. In other words, what "counts" as reading in my own life looks very different from when I was younger.

As technology continues to find its way into classrooms today, we must consider the modalities of reading we are willing to include. More importantly, we must consider what opportunities are denied, and what interests are diffused, when we *exclude* certain kinds of media.

## Closing Thoughts

Supporting young readers in self-selecting their own books requires explicit modeling and teaching in how to locate, preview, and evaluate books. Children need lots of support and encouragement for their reading choices. Independent readers can successfully choose books based on their interests and reading experiences. Most of all, choice is empowering and helps young readers develop confidence.