

Do We Have to Read?

“Do we *have* to read today? Can’t we just sleep?” DD asks me this question almost daily, not in the snide, whiny tone that I often hear from my other students, but almost in a helpful, suggestive way. It’s as if he were saying, “Do we *have* to have peanut butter and jelly today? Why not tuna instead?”

I have several responses ready for these questions. Yes, you have to read; the course is called “Read 180”, not “Sleep 180”; you can make any decision you want, but remember that you are responsible for the repercussions; you can read now, or at 2:20, doesn’t matter to me, I’m here anyway; you are more than welcome to spend this time cleaning out my car (I have discarded this last retort- it backfired once I discovered that, unlike me, my students would actually prefer cleaning out my car to reading). While experience has equipped me with a veritable grab bag of quirky ways to say, “YES! READ! READ! READ!” it has never made it any easier for my students to swallow. They claim to hate reading, and everyday is a battle to have them settle in for a twenty minute independent reading session. Having racked my brain for months trying to find something, anything that they would read without constant prompting, I changed my thinking. It became obvious that nothing I threw at them was going to suddenly inspire them to enjoy this activity. What did they even think reading was? To me it was an escape, but for my students reading was a prison, inflicted upon them by the wretched Ms. Kimball. I decided that instead of fighting them to love reading, I was going to try to understand what their perception of reading was, and then maybe we could figure out how to make it less terrible.

DD is a student in my morning section of READ 180. We meet daily in our classroom at Plymouth Regional High School located in rural Plymouth, NH. The high school serves the towns of Plymouth, Ashland, Campton, Holderness, Rumney, Thornton, and Wentworth for a combined enrollment over almost 1,000 students. Additionally, tuitioned students are accepted into the school’s Regional Technical Center from the nearby schools of Lin-wood High School (town of Lincoln), and Newfound Regional High School (town of Bristol).

Plymouth, NH is in the central part of the state, between the Lakes Regions and White Mountain National Forest. The town itself has a population of 8,000, but this number is often in flux when one considers the temporary population of the town’s University, Plymouth State, and tourists who frequent the area.

Plymouth and its surrounding towns have a very diverse economy. Plymouth, serving as the area's economic and cultural center, is primarily based on small businesses, some service industries, and tourism. The University provides much culture to the area, but the surrounding towns are much more rural than Plymouth. Town to town the tax regulations vary tremendously, and the students of PRHS come from a broad range of economic backgrounds.

PRHS works with an alternating block schedule where students have four one-and-a-half hour classes and then four differing classes on the alternate day. Classroom sizes seem to average between 12-25 students (in the past there has been a 25 student maximum). The school is fortunate to offer a vocational program, a thriving music, art, and theatre arts program, as well as covering a diverse offering of classes in the traditional fields. Technology has been placed as a high priority, and the school has two computer labs, each with approximately thirty computers, and an additional twenty to thirty more in the school library. Recent additions of "Smart Boards" to several of the classrooms have increased technology in the classroom. All this is great for a school where the economic division is so vast: any student can find access to a computer for word processing and research.

The basic disciplines are tracked, and the decision of placement is usually made on the recommendation of current instructors, desire of the student and/or parent, guidance counselors, and case managers if a student requires an IEP. This never seems to be an absolute, vetoed decision, but one that involves all parties, avid discussion, and flexibility. Students are often being moved out of certain levels of courses into others, well into the semester. Other disciplines, such as foreign language, vocational, and the arts are more dependent on prerequisite classes.

Students range in age, on average, from 14-19. The school is 96.8% White, which is even higher than the state average of 92.7%. Other races are represented, but very minimally. As of 2001, 23.3% of the student population had Individual Education Plans (Profile of PRHS, 2006).

I have been teaching two sections of English Read 180. Read 180 is a program developed by Scholastic that is intended to offer intense practice of the basic skills of reading to freshmen who scored lower than average (under 1000) on their Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), as well as receiving a recommendation from their eighth grade teacher, with parent approval. The scores on the initial SRI range from a low end of 102 to the high end of 1,115. This class is very formulaic, with thirty minutes for large group instruction, and twenty minutes each for the three "stations": zone work on the computers, independent reading, and small group instruction. During independent reading the students are provided with a collection of titles provided by

Scholastic to coincide with the Read 180 software. Each book has a coordinating test. They are steered through the course via their “RBook”, which is broken up into major workshops, having 3-5 pieces of literature related to each topic within the workshop (workshop titles include: *Survivors*, *Killer Plagues*, *Combat Zone*, *When Music Offends*, *In the Money*, *Amigo Brothers*, *Your Brain Exposed*, *Crime, Punishment...and Teens*, and *The Front Lines of Justice*). Students read and analyze the literature, while also completing the integrated exercises to reinforce vocabulary and writing skills. In addition to the Scholastic curriculum, the course requires students to complete the core curriculum of ninth grade English, as regulated by the Pemi-Baker School Board. Large group instruction time is usually used for this, as well as some small group time.

The students in these two courses are a microcosm of the overall school: varied socio-economic backgrounds. They also vary in regards to their overall academic performance. Approximately one-third of the students fall under some special education coding, but in general they represent the full spectrum of the student body. There are many different learning styles, many different strengths and weaknesses.

My own role as their teacher is a bit unique. I had worked at the school for two and one-half years as a special education paraprofessional before taking on their classes. For the first four months of this school year I was a mainstream paraprofessional, and was actually working in the first section of Read 180, so I had a chance to become acquainted with the program as well as the students in the classroom. While I did not work in the actual classroom for the second section until my position as a substitute began, I was acquainted with at least half of the students through contact in other disciplines. Both sections had the same original teacher who left at the end of December for maternity leave, returning the first week in May.

The actual classroom environment is also unique. The room was designed specifically to meet the needs of the Read 180 program. It is set in a far corner of the school, with very few distractions. Students and teachers from other classes frequently report to me that unless they had been looking for it, they would have never realized the classroom existed. It is a large room, equipped with five computers, a small reading corner complete with a couch and two arm chairs, and then the main classroom area which consists of three large tables set in a semi-circle, with an additional large round table slightly set off to the side. This last table serves as the venue for small group instruction. All four tables are occupied during large group instruction.

The first section of Read 180 has 14 students, 5 female and 11 male. The second section has 13 students, 6 female and 7 male. These small numbers break into three groups very well to meet the requirements of the program.

There is a very different dynamic between the two sections. The first tends to require directions only once, and discipline is rarely a problem. My class is pretty open and friendly, and this section responds well to this. We are playful, but focused. They rarely need to be asked to do anything more than once. They often ask for clarification, and respond honestly to questioning. They are a great way to start my day.

The second section, while dear to my heart, is quite a challenge. They arrive directly after lunch, and often require a few minutes to calm down and focus. I usually allow a few stories about their days' events while everyone gets settled. This class requires far more structure. They are proof of the theory that if you give someone an inch, they'll run all over. They need to be told directions several times, and about a third will then again need directions given on a one-on-one basis. They are resistant to direct instruction, and I have found I must be highly entertaining and expressive to hold their interest. There is often side conversation that needs to be halted. Many of the students come from the same elementary school, and feed off of one another's' comments. I can only equate them to a very complicated juggling act. This section also seems to require more individual attention, but, fortunately, I have been graced with a paraprofessional in each class. While the paraprofessional in the earlier section is often an observer (which can be very helpful), the second section takes full advantage of our paraprofessional's time. She is fully integrated into the classroom and has solidly gained the trust of all the students, which has been a huge asset. The two sections are very different, but overall the scores show approximately the same scoring and aptitude. They also seem to share the same disdain for reading.

I constantly find myself surprised by my students, and this is one of the great things about my job-it is never dull. I often reflect on the students' actions, responses, and decisions, and find myself trying to get into their heads, trying to understand where they are coming from. Very often, I can reflect back on my own trials as a teenager, and remember myself as they were, which is pretty exciting. We have all traveled along several different roads to become the adults we are now, but how often do we look back?

While I can see so much of my former self in my students, there is one area that we do not share common ground, and that is in this dread of reading. As long as I can recall, I have always been a reader. I remember, as the youngest of three, feeling jealous when my older brothers would read aloud, unaided by our parents. I coveted

this ability, and once I mastered it, it became a joy that I would partake in as often as possible. For me, reading is this absolutely pure act. It is freedom: it takes me to exotic places with new and different people; it doesn't cost a thing, doesn't ask for results, and won't ever leave me. In a complicated world where so much is demanded of the individual, reading is simply there for my pleasure, at my leisure. Part of my desire to become an English teacher was to share this special gift with my students. I was so filled with passion, how could they not find this contagious?

Ah, naivety. Upon taking over these classes I discovered that not only did my students not find this love of reading to be catching, but in fact they avoided it like the plague. I had been so excited that the students would get to read for twenty minutes *every day*. If someone had said that they required of that of me, I would have said, "Only twenty minutes? Why not an hour?" So when confronted daily with the question, "Do we *have* to read?" I wish I could reply, "No! You *get* to read! Isn't that awesome?" without receiving moans, groans, and award-winning eye rolls. I found much of my time during small group instruction being diverted to discipline problems in our independent reading area. Students allowed any and all distractions remove them from their books. Even with my morning class, my notoriously well-behaved students, I found much of my time was used to redirect them to their own books, and away from other students. I conducted an observation of their behavior during a typical 20 minute reading time. Conducted over two days with both classes, I found that, on average, 67% of a student's time was spent reading. This meant that students were averaging 13.4 minutes out of 20 actually reading, and this under the threat of Ms. Kimball's evil eye. What were my students doing instead of enjoying the privilege of independent reading? Sleeping, visiting the bathroom, talking, listening to others talking, or just simply staring off. My students were doing anything, really, to avoid solitary time with the book of their "choice".

In an effort to get the students to become more avid readers, I attempted to provide "more" than what was provided with the Scholastic materials. I would question the kids about their interests, and help them find their own books in our school library. I would take out twenty or so books myself every few weeks, and give the kids a brief overview of each. I even found myself buying books specifically geared toward my readers from my own meager income. The outcome always seemed to be the same. The students would be excited by my choices, even arguing over certain books, and then would actively read for that first day. I would leave feeling pleased, even hopeful. This would be short lived, however, cut short the next day once the students had discarded the book, declaring it to be "boring".

So, as their reading teacher, where did I go from there? It is important to understand our students, even if that is initially done by understanding how different

they are from us. In my continuous attempt to find interesting “free” reading material (the irony of “free” reading time is not lost on me or my resistant readers), I at one point brought in *Maus* for DD. *Maus* is a graphic novel written by Art Spiegelman. It tells the story of Spiegelman’s father, a Polish-Jew, and how he survived the concentration camps during World War II. At first DD read it voraciously, barely stopping during independent reading time; typically a choice opportunity to distract and throw things at other students. After three days he told me he did not want to read it anymore. “Why?” I couldn’t help asking. I received the standard response. “It’s boring,” he said. That’s the rub. Of all the words I would use to describe the Holocaust, “boring” just isn’t one of them. I began to feel a divide growing between myself and my students, a division that was created by my persistence that they read and their resistance to reading.

Why do they hate reading so much? Why is something I love a chore for my students? I understand that everyone has different interests, but I was noticing that it was the majority, not the minority of my students who were resistant. I wondered if it was because these students were labeled as “poor readers”. That could turn anyone off. But what did they think reading was? Obviously not the freeing privilege that I considered it to be. So I refined my thinking: How do Read 180 students perceive reading?

I decided this would be the focus of my research, trying to determine how these students viewed reading, since they did not seem to view it in the same way I did. I would monitor what the students chose to read during their twenty minute independent reading, and how much of that time was actually spent reading. I also chose to have the students reflect personally; through free writes (these would prove to be the most revealing). While my subjects included the combined total of 33 students between the two sections of READ 180, I chose two male students, DD and AK as my case studies.

DD is one of the most proficient students in my class. He usually finishes all work in a timely and accurate manner. His work shows above average comprehension and grammar and spelling skills for the class. He is very intelligent, volunteers answers, and asks questions. His attitude always seems to be that he would rather be someplace else, doing something else, but he’s here so he might as well do the work, right? He’ll always let me know through little comments the futility of school work, but never refuses to complete an assignment. DD has lived in Campton most of his life, appears to come from a middle class family, and is very active. He loves video games, mountain biking, and snowmobiles. He has indicated that he would like to be a snowmobile mechanic someday.

DD consistently scores between 93%-98%. Whenever he receives work edited for improvement he always makes these adjustments without complaint, or embellishments. On the initial SRI taken in August, DD scored 915. By our most recent SRI taken in March, he had improved 100 point to a 1,015. His completion of topic software content in the Read 180 program shows to be on par with the class average. During a typical 20 minute independent reading, DD will have to be redirected back to his book at least once. This, too, is representative of the entire class. Typically the distraction will be a side conversation with another student. I try to redirect the students by catching their eye, and nodding to their book. While most students will respond to this non-verbal clue by immediately complying, or displaying complete shock with an adamant, "What? I was *reading!*" DD will simply smile at me and respond with a confident, "Hi!", and eventually turn back to his book, no denial, no shame. He rarely requires another cue.

The other student, AK, is also diligent in his work. He scores between 85%-90% in overall class work. However, he is far below average in regards to spelling, vocabulary, and grammar, but above average in comprehension. Very often I have to read his answers two and three times to decipher his meanings. His written responses are often almost unintelligible. His first SRI showed a score of 1025, and his most recent (March), showed a decline to 955, a decrease of 70. Seven out of 25 students have shown some decline, and while this can be attributed to several causes (instructors, implementation, the program itself, low blood sugar, bad day, who knows?), this deviation is typical of AK's performance. While he usually seems persistent in his work, his results are often inconsistent. Despite meetings with teachers, his case manager and parents, we have been unable to come up with a conclusion to AK's inconsistent performance. The Read 180 software tracks the time students are actively working, and AK's engaged time is among the highest of both sections. Despite this, he has completed only one segment, second lowest only to a student who joined the class four months after the beginning of the year.

AK grew up in Florida and this is his second year in New Hampshire. He comes from a lower income family. For interests, AK likes working on cars that he drives around his property (he does not yet have a license), and gathering and selling scrap from the dump, as well as old appliances and furniture. He has an avid interest in welding, and would like that to be part of his future employment. His conversations often revolve around ways of making money. There seems to be a direct correlation between his hobbies and potential income.

AK also requires at least one redirect during independent reading. However, he almost always requires a verbal cue to get back on task. This is because he is usually so engaged in his oration of his hobbies or money-making plans to other

students (who almost appear to be held hostage) that I can never catch his eye. Once I gain his attention by saying his name, he always appears surprised, and responds with a polite, “Ma’am?” I then have to explain that he should be reading, and allow other students to read as well. He then resumes reading, and rarely requires another cue.

Both students have indicated a strong dislike of reading. They deem it necessary only as a tool to learn how to do something. They both regard independent reading as a waste of time. This became apparent after the class’s first free write, “What is reading?” I posed this question with the aim of collecting data, wetting their feet into the world of the unrestrictive free write and to possibly get some wheels turning in their fertile young minds

“*Free write?* What’s that?” was the chorus I had groaned at me. I explained that I was doing research on reading, and that I would appreciate that they take five minutes to answer my question for them of, “What is reading?” My self-proclaimed reading-hater, DD, asked, “We can write whatever we want?” “Whatever you want,” I answered, “I want you to be as honest as possible.”

The two classes and accepted and executed this challenge, respectively, as I expected. The afternoon class settled in after a good two minutes of grumbling and scavenging for writing implements. The morning class, my good doobies, immediately began writing diligently. I noticed that DD was working a little too diligently. He typically completes his work with a fair amount of good-natured grumbling, but today he grabbed paper, and began writing at a fever pitch. When he had completed it, he brought it up to me, not waiting for me to collect it as I usually do, and slapped it on my desk with a smile. I felt like he had been waiting for this moment his whole life. He had also brought up the response of AK, who sat next to him and said, “Me and AK are in complete agreement.” In support of that fact he had written on the bottom of AK’s paper:

*“I totally!! Agree!!
By: DD*

Needless to say, he had me hooked. I could not wait to read his free write. As soon as the class adjourned, I whipped out DD’s paper. Here’s his response:

Reading is really boring. All you do, is grab a book, open it, sit down, and read. WOW!, big whop, your parents always say; “get of the computer, and go outside to get exercise or read a book.” Still, if you sit down you don’t get exercise. Your still sitting on your butt, doing nothing besides flipping the pages every 2-3 minutes. I know that reading gets you smarter, but if you think about it, you

still have to read playing a game on the computer. I don't mind reading, but I don't like reading novels, or fiction. I read stuff like: "how to fix a truck," or "build a truck from ground up". So, this is my opinion on reading.

And, of course, AK's response:

Reading is the process of converting letter to knoleg. Reading is not a hoby that I like. I only like to read what gives me information about things I am working on. Most of the things I read answer a question I am having about a product/machines. All other reading is just a waste of work time.

In their book, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys*, Smith and Wilhelm found the male students they observed were most invested in learning when they posed their own questions, not ones established by the teacher. "In general, the boys rejected school literacies as being about someone else's concerns, in part because in contrast to their out-of-school activities, reading was cast as a solitary pursuit. They also often saw school literacy and the materials used to pursue it as boring, difficult, and off point. However, we have also seen that boys would embrace literate activities, both inside and outside of school, that were fun, that possessed intrinsic and immediately functional value, and that connected to them and their lives." (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002)

AK and DD's responses were not unusual, and not only supported by other males in the class. This belief that reading for the sake of reading was a waste of time became most evident when I asked my second free write question, "Why do people read in their free time?" I asked them to respond in the form of a free write, thinking and responding for five minutes.

When asked to complete the first free write I gave them ("What is reading?"), my morning class used ten minutes to complete the assignment. My afternoon class used just the full five that I requested. This second free write was completed by both classes within two to four minutes. I was not sure if this was because of the disdain they have decided to have for free writes, or the fact that they know immediately following the free write I will announce which member of the class's personalized crossword puzzle we will be completing today (there is definitely a lesson to be taken from this), but upon reading the free writes, the reason was obvious.

With the "What is reading?" topic, I got a variety of answers that the students obvious thought on; they seemed to really have to stop and ask, "Yeah, what *is* reading?" With this second question, however, most of my students seemed

prepped with the answer. Why do people read in their free time? It was obvious to my students. These people had too much time on their hands.

Out of the 25 students that responded, 19 mentioned in their free write that people read because they had too much free time, were bored, or had nothing better to do. While many students responded that people might read for enjoyment, this was often an after thought:

People read on their freetime maybe because they have nothing to do. Another reason is because people love to read different books. Also maybe some people do it to take up their freetime, like if they where waiting for a plane, or maybe just sitting in a car waiting for someone.

That is why people read on their free time.

Another student wrote:

The reason that people read in their freetime is because they are so bored that they have nothing better to do. Another reason is because they like to read. Also people read in their free time because they are reading a good book. They are lazy.

This last sentiment was not distinctive. Several students made responses which indicated an impairment on the part of the reader; that their decision to read was ill-advised or because they were not capable of more active enterprises. DD, my proud non-reader, had this to say:

I think people read on their own time because they want to learn, (not like it will teach you anything). Or, they have no life and don't know how to go outside and exercise, or don't know how to play Xbox. Or maybe they have too much freetime.

Some reasons given for what could be so wrong with people that they had to turn to the horrible world of reading were that they had no friends, they were geeks, they did not play sports, it was for older people, and, my personal favorite, :

People read in there free time becose they have way too much free time because they have too much monny.

While I desperately wish this was the reason for my avid reading, I have to wonder how many students consider leisure reading to be an act of the idle rich, people who have to find ways to fill their day with things besides working. This response was very surprising to me-I had never considered reading to be indicative of class distinction. This particular student does come from a lower-income family. I

am not sure of the reading habits of his family, however. Still, I suppose I can see this point of view. Who has time to read when they are trying to support a family? When people are struggling everyday just to make ends meet, it is understandable that reading can be viewed as frivolous. Still, this cannot be the singular cause for my students' distaste for reading. DC, one of my more focused, hard-working and quieter students concurred with the sentiment that reading is a waste of time. DC comes from an upper-middle class family, and is in fact the daughter of a local newspaper columnist. Here is her response:

I think that people read in their freetime because they have nothing better to do. People could also read in their freetime because they are bored and they are reading a good book. If you have free time then I don't think that your life is interesting enough. Reading takes time and if you read then you have a lot of free time on your hands. And free time isn't always good.

Even more alarming than the response that only the rich read were the few free writes (similar to DC's), which seemed to indicate that too much reading was detrimental. AK responded with his typical confidence and strong opinion, once again advocating the need for more time spent at work:

People some times spend their free time reading. Many people that spend there time reading because the want to learn about some or pass the time away. Others put their reading on the top of their priority list. Many people get behind on their work by spending to much time with their nose in a book and letting the world pass by.

While I agree that reading should not be a replacement for personal adventure and physical fitness, it is still surprising to me that students can consider reading to be a "bad" thing, one that indicates an impairment, or deficiency on the part of the reader. Eleven of my students mentioned that people choose to read because they wanted to; they were interested in the book, or perhaps it relaxed them and offered an escape. Eight students suggested that perhaps readers wanted to learn about something, and two students mentioned that people might have to read for homework or work. Still, most of these comments were an add-on to the more prevalent opinion that these people, these "readers" did not know how to use their time wisely. Out of the 25 students, only six suggested that people read to learn, or because they enjoy it, without commenting that the reader must not have anything better to do. Only six students assumed that people might want to read, make time to read rather than read to pass time or in response to their inability to find a more enterprising pastime.

I took a step back to analyze the data. What is the common thread among my students' feelings on reading? Reading seems to have a direct correlation with too much time on one's hands. Reading is valuable to learn a specific task. Reading is something they have to do. Reading supposedly can make you smarter. Even given a choice of material, reading is still considered work.

Work. Where have I read that before? AK mentioned in both of his free writes how reading takes away from work time, while DD mentions how reading takes away from play time. I think that is the key right there: work. Having instructed these two students for four months, and assisted them prior to this as a paraprofessional for four months, I have come to know their personalities a bit. They each have strong feelings about their "forced" education. AK seems to consider school as an obstacle preventing him from doing what he really wants, which is to work. DD is the opposite. He considers school to be work that prevents him from what he really wants, which is play. I myself find school and work often get in the way of what I really want, which is to read. Their resentment of reading seems to be resentment of being forced into an activity they'd rather not be doing. Reading represents school, and that's not where they want to be. They both seem to understand the importance of reading as far as it serves their immediate purposes, whether it be work, or play.

How can we expect our kids to enjoy forced labor, if this is indeed how they view reading? I look at their candid responses, with their atrocious spelling laughing in the face of language arts, and I realize how difficult it will be to improve our children's reading until we change their view of what it is. They do not share my love of reading as a pure act, but see it as a forced act. It is something that is difficult for them, and will continue to be as long as they are forced to be good at, and to like it.

One of my earliest questions with these students was, "Why do they hate reading so much?" While I cannot give a definite answer, I realize that they are not invested as readers because they are not invested in the material. Their free writes told me what they would rather be doing: working, playing sports, playing video games. They are telling me right there. While I would rather be reading, they would rather be doing other things that they find personally fulfilling. Obviously, I cannot spend our classes engaging in these activities, but I can use them to engage my students. We are always telling students that there are things they *must* know, but do we ever tell them *why*? As teachers, our goal is to equip our students with the tools they need to lead successful lives. I strongly believe that my students need reading and writing skills to succeed to the best of their potential. But what is their potential? I realized long ago that DD and AK and I will never have an independent book club where we voraciously discuss our love of *The Sun Also Rises*. Most likely, I am not teaching future English teachers. It would be doing them an injustice to

teach them to be the best Ms. Kimball they can be. If DD would rather be snowmobiling or mountain biking, I want him to be able to use his skills as a student to help him learn how. If AK would rather be pursuing money-making schemes, as his teacher I must give him the skills to most effectively pursue this.

While making choices of what to offer my students to read, I always hope to scaffold their learning towards great stories that give them a taste of the greater world, and to arouse their empathy. In his book *Deeper Reading*, Kelly Gallagher says “We teach these great works because we want our students to do more than appreciate a good story. We want to provide them with what Kenneth Burke calls ‘imaginative rehearsals’ for the world they will soon inherit” (Gallagher, 2004). I am venturing to say that we need to realize the world they are inheriting is not necessarily our own. If we scaffold their skills, can’t we also scaffold their interest? Whatever they inherit, I want them to be prepared.

So if we cannot change their minds about reading, can they change ours about what they read? Smith and Wilhelm seem to think so. “It seems that we need to redefine literacy in semiotic terms. Semiotics is the study of all meaning-making signs. Such a redefinition would include the ability to communicate and make meaning with various sign systems, such as music, video, visual arts, and electronic technologies, and would build on the interconnections among various forms of literacy. Redefining literacy in semiotic terms will help us offer more choices and explore the meanings of different kinds of texts with particular powers to engage and express. It will also recognize and celebrate both who the boys are and the literacies they currently practice, which will allow them to see themselves and what they see as important in the classroom. At the same time, it may offer opportunities to build on boys’ strengths and interests in popular culture and media literacies as a way to develop more traditional forms of literacy. Finally, conceiving of literacy more widely will help us prepare students for a modern world that uses a profusion of multimedia signs.” (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002)

If we teach them the skills they need using materials they are interested in, we are meeting our goal as teachers. We need to make reading something they want to do, not have to do, and this is only going to happen by making it worth their while. So how is this done? I thought I was doing this by picking books that somehow involved topics they were interested in outside of school. I was still forcing them to read, however. While I am at the end of my time with DD, AK, and their classmates, I intend to use what I have learned from them. As I stated earlier, I love learning from my students. For instance, I have learned that much of my time during independent reading is spent disciplining. Their proximity to other groups provides too much distraction. The students tend to participate more actively if the entire class

independently reads at the same time, and with future classes this will be the protocol. I have also found, in my attempt to have them read *anything*, that magazines are not the answer. They tend to flip through, looking at the pictures and occasionally reading a caption. I interviewed another Read 180 teacher and she also found this to be the case.

Another thing I have learned is that there are many aspects of our lives that my students and I do not have in common, aside from just reading. The primary interests of my students, particularly the boys, tend to be in areas where I am weakest. It appears that I will be learning even more than I expected. It is my intention to further my students' education through their own interests. I see now that my summer will be spent interviewing mechanics, welders, mountain bikers and other professionals, looking for captivating non-fiction. I will continue to seek out meaningful texts to expand their canon, as I have been doing, but I will also rely on information from the very people that my students hope to be. With future classes I will begin our year with community building, this time with particular focus on what these students want to learn. If they want to spend their free time being welders, artists, musicians, or athletes, that's wonderful, but they are going to learn about it by reading and sharing in my classroom. In his book, *Explaining Reading* Gerald G. Duffy says:

“Often, teachers’ visions are combinations of several perspectives, and, of course, the ultimate goal is that students develop their own literacy visions. Rather, the important point is that teachers must care, because our caring inspires students. We care when we have strong beliefs about why it is important for students to learn to read and write and when we make those beliefs evident by immersing them in “real” literacy during the day. By creating a classroom environment that represents what we care most about, we set an expectation for what is important about learning to read.” (Duffy, 5)

I want to take that a step further by creating the expectation that what they want to learn about is important, and that I care about who they are. It is my hope that I can form a community with my students where they are learning with a purpose, not just because I am making them. The optimist in me is going to continue to believe that these students do not hate reading as much as they claim, but hate being forced to do it. Therefore, if we are a community working together for our own purposes, am I forcing them?

I hope I can at least make them not hate it. Make it easier. I will continue to share with them stories I love, and introduce them literature that perhaps appeals to them personally. The hopeful, passionate teacher in me looks forward to a generation

of students who have not learned to view reading as indentured servitude performing tedious, difficult tasks, but as a privilege. The determined teacher in me will continue to look for ways to present reading as a joyous act. And what of my current reading-haters? But perhaps someday AK will be able to apply for a small business loan to start his welding business with unbroken English, and DD will be able to.....do whatever it is he wants to do. And maybe someday, years from now, when they are too tired to go out and play after a day of work, they'll relax and pick up a book of their own accord. Or maybe they'll play video games and be able to read the directions.