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Gold Level

My Journey to This Point

I became a librarian because I was tired of feeling like a hypocrite. As a high school English teacher for eleven years, I often felt like I was doing more harm than good in cultivating a reading habit in my students. Forcing them to read "required" books mandated by my district's curriculum was not turning them into lifelong readers. In fact, I felt like I was doing the opposite. This is the topic that I have grappled with throughout my sixteen years as an educator:

HOW DO WE GET KIDS (ESPECIALLY TEENS!) TO LOVE READING?

This question catapulted me out of the trenches of the classroom and spurred me to go back to school to become a librarian; this question is what I continually contemplate with my fellow librarians and teachers; this question is the subject of many of my personal and professional blog posts; this is the question that I keep coming back to through the Abydos recertification process.

Feeding teens a steady diet of "boring" classics that they cannot relate to and short, dull passages stifled by multiple-choice questions is NOT the answer. If anything, it magnifies the problem. I am not criticizing my fellow English teacher heroes for these woes. I think this is a systemic problem exasperated by the fact that educational laws and policy are created by politicians who know little about how to teach children or how the brain learns. As I talk with hard-working, passionate teachers, many feel like their hands are tied by confining curriculum created by the mandates of a high-stakes-test-crazed culture; what they WANT to do and what they CAN do in the classroom are often two different things--unfortunately.

However, I firmly believe that as literacy educators, we CAN do what we know is best for our students. It's why we go to conferences like Abydos and research best practice methods for teaching literacy. It's why we collaborate with others and constantly search for more effective

ways to teach our students. In my years spent researching this topic, the works of Kelly Gallagher, Stephen Krashen, Donalyn Miller, Jim Trelease, and Steven Layne all support the same solution: To turn kids (teens too!) into lifelong readers, they need:

- **ACCESS** to high-interest books.
- **EXPOSURE** to quality writing through read-alouds as mentor texts.
- **CHOICE** in reading what they WANT to read (not what we think they should be reading).
- **TIME** to read.

These are the “Antidotes to Aliteracy” that I focused on in my last Abydos recertification presentation in 2011. I was in an unexpected place at that time--a librarian in an elementary school. I did not foresee my professional career going down that path, but I am so thankful that it did. Working in an elementary school changed my perception of what is being taught to our younger students. I hang my head in shame to admit this, but I once sat on my high school teacher throne of smugness and said, "Why don't they know this? What are they teaching those kids in elementary school?" I would fling blame down on elementary teachers like I was some high and mighty Queen of English. (As an Abydos trainer, I know better, but I still went to this dark place in moments of extreme frustration.) But the truth is--they ARE teaching these concepts--research, grammar, how to READ, how to WRITE, how to THINK: It's all being taught. (My theories as to why they are not retaining these skills might be the subject of my next recertification.)

Being an elementary librarian not only erased my secondary smugness, but it also reminded me that most children enter school ready to embrace reading and writing with open arms; they yearn to possess the powerful gift of literacy. After eleven years of being surrounded by cynical, jaded teenagers in terms of their attitudes toward literacy (and life in general), I found this JOY so refreshing and necessary to my soul. Being intoxicated by their book love was wonderful, but what I loved most was reading aloud to all of my students in all grade levels--Kindergarten through sixth grade. My four years as an elementary librarian rekindled my love for picture books and the power that not only comes from sharing them but their power when used in teaching.

Back Where I Belong

Even though I loved my time in Elementary Land, I knew it was temporary, so when the opportunity came for me to go back to high school, I grabbed it even though it was painful to leave those sweet, smiling, book-loving kids. I am one of two librarians at Mesquite High School, the same place I graduated from twenty years ago, which is surreal. I knew I had to go back to the battleground of high school because it is where I belong. I feel like the war for readers is waged in high school. It's that crucial point in life when all of the OTHER STUFF starts taking over, enticing kids away from books. We have to woo them back to reading. I think using picture books as a tool to put in our arsenals will help us in the wooing.

Why Picture Books Work for High School Students

As an Abydos trainer, I have seen the power that picture books can have on an audience of adult learners, which has led me to adopt this mantra, “You are never too old to enjoy a great picture book.” As an English teacher, I incorporated picture books into lessons every chance I got, and my students enjoyed them and extracted deep meaning from them.

However, there is a stigma associated with using picture books to teach older students---*too easy, too babyish, too many pictures, not enough text, not enough RIGOR*... In a time when “RIGOR” is the buzzword in education, curriculum writers and teachers often scramble to put more “rigorous” texts in front of students. In *Book Love*, Penny Kittle disagrees with this frustrating fact by stating, “Reading only what is too hard and then telling them what it means is not making them better readers...we must balance rigor with ease” (7). Our philosophy as Abydos trainers sides with Kittle and is supported by Beers and Probst in *Notice and Note*:

Rigor is not an attribute of a text, but rather a characteristic of our behavior with that text. Put another way, rigor resides in the energy and attention given to the text, not in the text itself (21).

In *Reading Ladders: Leading Students from Where They Are to Where We'd Like Them to Be*, Teri Lesesne supports that rigor is not measured by reading levels when she states, "Lexiles...are not the way to determine the rigor of a text. Instead, rigor should be determined by sophistication of thought" while reading the text (6). This concept that rigor resides in the engagement of thought with a text is the cornerstone of my argument to prove that picture books not only have a place in the secondary classroom but can be taught in a rigorous manner. Picture books need to be incorporated into the secondary classroom because they are supported by brain research, can be used to scaffold complex concepts, build on background knowledge, and serve as powerful mentor texts.

At last year's Abydos Conference, Kendall Haven spoke about the scientific proof that our brains crave story. Listening to his fascinating speech made me realize that we do not always teach with this in mind on the secondary level. The increase in standards and obsession with rigor has turned instruction into quick hits on the surface rather than slow and steady digs for depth. In many content areas (and often in ELA), teachers feel so overwhelmed by all of the concepts that the curriculum requires us to cover that we do not take the time to teach through stories, which picture books can provide. Haven states, "If you use stories to create context and relevance for new lesson blocks and begin to introduce unfamiliar topics through story, research confirms that you will increase both learning and interest in the topic" (109). Using picture books across content areas to introduce concepts can help students connect their learning and become more successful.

Picture books can also be used to scaffold students into a more difficult text or skill. Vygotsky's work supports using picture books in mini-lessons to model a skill or concept. Then students are able to approach the skill in a more difficult text. Picture books can be used to build on background knowledge. Haven states, "If you want students to comprehend new material, place that information within the context of a story to increase comprehension. Stories effectively teach because people comprehend them better" (92). Picture books help students access prior knowledge because "the reader's personal experience and familiar story structure combine to create comprehension of a new text" (Haven 93).

Picture books are also perfect mentor texts. In *Mechanically Inclined*, Jeff Anderson states that "a mentor text is any text that can teach a writer about any aspect of writer's craft, from sentence structure to quotation marks to 'show don't tell'" (16). Picture books are short, well-written texts that pack a powerful punch when analyzed with a writer's eyes, but they also need to be read aloud so that students can hear the power of the language. Reading picture books aloud is an effective way to not only model how a book should sound, but they can also lure older students back to the positive feelings that they once held for books. Lesesne states, "Reading aloud is simple and effective. It models fluency for students; it motivates students to pick up books to read; and it develops skills in listening and reading comprehension" (40).

Picture books serve as models of powerful language; they motivate students to come back to reading by reminding them that there ARE many wonderful books out there in the great wide world, and they help develop literacy skills. How can any secondary teacher argue against that?

However, the strongest proof that I have discovered to build my case for picture books is in the classrooms that I visit; the proof resides in the intangibles of teaching a lesson. It is the Freshman girl drenched in attitude who gives me that "look" (you know the one) when I walk into her classroom and hold up a picture book. It is in the Senior football player out to prove his swagger by declaring, "Picture books are for babies" before I begin to read. Actually, I love it when this happens; it is my challenge. I tune in to the reactions of these kids as I read aloud. I watch for the signs of engagement--the leaning in, the look of thought that spreads across their faces. These are the signs that show me that this crazy idea of using picture books in high school classrooms works. As teachers of literacy, we KNOW when a kid is with us; we can FEEL it in our bones; it is what fuels us to keep doing what we love, even when it is hard. Do I always get this reaction? No. But when I do, it makes my book-loving soul sing.

After one picture book lesson with a Senior English class, one boy (Mr. Swagger) came up to me and said, "You got me, Miss. I thought it was stupid that you were going to read us that book for kids. But it made me THINK. I had no idea that kind of stuff was in picture books."

Picture books for the WIN.

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Link for Suzanne Collins & James Proimos video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5dwKHYoiak

Social Media Connections

Picture Book Blog: *LOL--Librarian On Loan: Two High School Librarians Blogging About How They Use Picture Books in the High School Classroom*
<http://hspicturebooks.blogspot.com/>

Librarian Blog: *The Red Reading Chair: A Passionate High School Librarian on a Mission to Create Life-long Readers One Teen at a Time*
<http://redreadingchair.blogspot.com/>

Personal Blog: *My Western Sky* <http://mywesternsky.blogspot.com/>

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Follow my library on **Instagram**: @skeeterlibrary

Follow me on **Good Reads** (<https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/4530008-amianne-bailey>).

MHS Senior Reactions to Picture Books
Why should more high school teachers use picture books?

“I think teachers should use picture books in their lessons because they get us to be interested, and maybe the teacher will have some fun also. I loved it!”

“Picture books are not just for little kids because illustrations bring imagery to the mind. The mind is helped by the illustrations, and it helps me understand better.”

“They convey emotions that little kids might not understand but high schoolers would...Our whole lives we’ve been taught with picture books and then when we get to high school, it just stops and becomes boring. Picture books connect to us.”

“Picture books aren’t just for young children because there is so much more to think about inside the stories. It is more in-depth than just a few colorful pictures. I would enjoy including more picture books in high school because it will help sharpen our analytical skills.”

“Picture books can make the brain think even harder.”

“Some picture books have a deep meaning in them. We just don’t expect them to.”

“Picture books still make you think, and it might help students get more connected with books.”

“Because imagination never stops. Even in high school.”

“I might pay attention a whole lot more if my teachers used picture books.”

“Picture books use complex literary devices.”

“We can get more out of them than little kids because we have more experiences with the world.”

“Most of us are visual learners and we need pictures. We can analyze what the book is saying through the pictures.”

“They can be more engaging and attention grabbing than just words. Pictures can convey more meaning than just words.”

“Picture books are like a puzzle. It has pieces that you put together and gain more experience from it.”

“Picture books have secret codes that can be looked into, and with the wider view that the older generations have then the secret messages can be revealed.”

“In picture books...we can really dig up the hidden things and like the secret things that we can see in the pictures. And also they are way better than just boring books.”

“Because being older and knowing a little more, I can use more background knowledge to think about the book.”

“I am a visual learner. If I can see it in pictures, I understand it more.”

“Because when I see nothing but words on a page, my head hurts and I get sleepy. Then I fall asleep and get a bad grade. Picture books keep me awake.”