

Appearing Acts: Creating Readers in a High School English Class

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Asking how she, as a teacher, can motivate students to discover the joy of reading, Joan Kernan Cone explores students' self-perceptions as "readers" and "non-readers." By engaging her students in this question and through her willingness to respond to their ideas, Cone experiments with methods to cultivate "readers" — those who read on their own for pleasure and knowledge. Through the use of student journals, reading materials matching their interests and cultural backgrounds, and group discussion, she inspires a passion for reading. As a result of her in-class research and collaborative reflection with her students, Cone advocates creating a "community of readers" in which students can choose books, read them, talk about them, and encourage each other to read.

"They're never going to read Dickens. . . ."

One Saturday evening in mid-November, during a conversation about teaching, a friend of mine — a computer genius and Tom Clancy fan — said to me, "You're having your kids read the wrong books. They're never going to read Dickens when they get out of school. You need to introduce them to authors they *will* read."

At first I was irritated by his words. What did he know of the books I was teaching? What did he know of my commitment to expand the canon, to bring new writers into my classroom who represented the cultural and racial backgrounds of my students? Yet, as much as I wanted to dismiss his suggestion as another example of everyone-knows-how-to-teach-better-than-teachers, I could not. He had touched a nerve.

For all of the attention I pay to literature in my classes, I am not producing readers: that is, students who choose to read on their own for pleasure and for knowledge. That saddens me. A friend of mine tells her students a truth I've known since I was five: "If you don't read, you can only live one tiny life" (a paraphrase of an S. I. Hayakawa idea). I want my students to share my experience of living many lives through reading. I, a wife, a mother, and a veteran teacher, have become Antonia Shimerda, Franny Glass, and Jing-Mei Woo; have traveled to Mahfouz's Cairo, Gordimer's Johannesburg, and Vargas Llosa's Milaflores; and have discovered the identity of Mr. Rochester's first wife, the intricacies of Willie Stark's politics, and the political intrigues of Deep Throat.

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The habit of reading not only opens a world of vicarious adventure to students; it also encourages them to weigh ideas, take informed stands, and think deeply. Reading offers them insights into themselves and their worlds — private, national, global — insights that allow them to speak intelligently, vote wisely, rear kind children, counsel, lead. What happens to students who graduate from high school barely literate, reading only books assigned in class and having neither the skill nor the confidence to read a book on their own? Just as important, what happens to students who *can* read but do not; who go to college, perhaps to professional schools, and yet read only the daily newspaper, an occasional weekly news magazine, or the *New Yorker* in the dentist's office? My friend's words challenged me to examine the way I was teaching literature, challenged me to find a way to lead students to become readers.

Creating Readers: Was Choice the Answer?

The next Monday I went to class, told my first- and second-period seniors what my friend had said about my teaching “the wrong books,” and then gave them a reading assignment. If they wanted to earn an A for the semester, they had to read a novel of at least five hundred pages (or two of 250 pages) written since 1985, that had no Cliff notes and had not been made into a film. I gave them two opportunities to take a test on the books. The first, two days before winter vacation; the second, one week before the end of the semester. The students immediately posed questions: Was a “novel” a fiction or nonfiction book? Did they have to buy the book, or could they check it out of the library? What if they chose a book with 480 pages? Would I be assigning other homework at the same time?

After answering their questions, I posted the deadline for finishing the book in large letters on my front chalk board and moved on to *Othello*. A week before the independent reading book was due, I asked students to write a letter telling me how they were doing in each of their classes and how they thought they would do on their upcoming progress report, a written evaluation of their grade up to that point in the semester. In terms of English class, I asked them to discuss their independent reading book.

As I read over their papers, I grew uneasy. Some students, like Tassie, were excited about the assignment: “The outside reading is a wonderful idea. I love it! It gives me options. I can read eighty pages in two days or three pages in one day. It's up to me.” Some, like Wilson, were moving along with the assignment: “I'm determined to finish my outside book since it tells a lot of things about China and I want to see how the student movement began.” A few students had already finished their books. But the majority of the responses were not promising. Many students gave me what I felt were teacher-pleasing responses. Danielle wrote, “My independent reading book is *Misery* by Stephen King [no apology for reading a book made into a film]. Everything about this book is a mystery. I find myself really committed to this book.” Others were even less specific — they had praise for the book, or they were doing fine with the reading,

but they did not include the name of the book nor discuss its plot or characters. As Jeff commented, “My outside book is easier than I thought it would be because I barely have time to take a leak. I found something I could relate to and in turn it caught my attention.”

My uneasiness about students’ progress with their independent reading was confirmed the day I gave the first test. When asked to retell the ending of the book from the main character’s point of view and to discuss why the ending was satisfying or unsatisfying, only nine students of thirty-four in first period and eleven of thirty-five in second period could do so in a way that demonstrated that they had read their book thoroughly and thoughtfully. A few tried to fake their answers. Craig wrote of *Remains of the Day*, “Well, in the end, Mr. Stevens drove off and was excited to show his employer all that he had learned on this interesting journey of his.” What had happened to Jeff and Danielle, who had written only a few days before of being “really into” their books? “The book got boring and I didn’t have time to start a new one.” “I’ll read a 500-page book next time.” Others made no excuses or promises.

What had gone wrong? I had given students a choice of books, homework time to read, and, in the last few days before the test, class time for reading. Yet the majority of the students had not finished a book.

Despite the disappointing results, I was not willing to give up on the independent reading idea. Over the December vacation, I thought about what I could do. Clearly, I needed to check that students were reading books that fit the previously established criteria (such as no Cliff notes, no books made into movies). My leniency with the first book had led to students “fudging”: they had reported about novels that had been turned into films (“But I didn’t see the movie”), books that were used in other classes, and autobiographies of current star athletes that bore a close resemblance to articles I had read in recent sports pages. In addition, I realized that waiting until close to the assignment deadline to give students in-class reading time was not a good idea. I needed to allocate time early in the term so that students had read enough of their books to complete the assignment.

When school reconvened in January, I was determined to make the next independent reading assignment a success. After handing back the December tests, I talked about the results and asked students to write about, and then discuss as a class, why they had read or not read the first book. I hoped that by forcing them to reflect first in writing and then aloud, I would help them take responsibility for reading and thereby inspire more of them to finish the next book. Several students said they had trouble finding a book. “I went to [a chain book store],” Kema announced, “and asked the lady to recommend a book written by an African American after 1985 and she said there weren’t any.” Students who were taking an elective class in African American literature were horrified — at the saleswoman’s ignorance as well as at Kema’s believing her. “What are you talking about?” they asked her. “What about Toni Morrison and Alice Walker? You need to go to another bookstore.” Those comments created an

opportunity for me to mention the names of bookstores easily accessible in nearby Berkeley — bookstores with readers as salesclerks and tables laden with books by African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, women, gays, new writers. Students who knew of other sources for books offered suggestions to those who didn't want to buy books. Next we talked about the criteria for choosing the books. The page limit this time was determined by what they had done on the previous independent reading assignment. If they had read a five hundred page book, they had no further independent reading requirement; if they had read a 250-page book, they had to read another book of at least 250 pages; and if they had not read a book, they needed to choose a book of five hundred pages. The students stated that the 1985 publication date was too limiting and asked that it be changed to at least 1980 — I agreed. I restated my insistence on novels, not biographies or books from which movies had been made. The students asked if I had any suggestions, which I did. I had lots of books to lend and encouraged them to come in to talk with me so I could help them find books that were right for them.

I set aside the first three days of the following week for in-class silent reading. On Monday, several students came without books: they had forgotten their book at home, they hadn't had time to buy one or go to the library, or they couldn't find anything interesting. I handed out anthologies of short stories to these students and we all settled down for silent reading. The next day, every student had a book. During this time, I did not allow students to do other homework — despite their promises to read at home if they could just do their biology in class or protests about not being able to read without listening to music. If a student dropped her head in her arms for a nap, I sent her out to get a drink of water; the second time it happened I threatened to mark her absent.

At the end of the third day of reading, I asked students to write about their books: What is the title? What has happened so far in it? Do you like or dislike it? Why? What is it going to take for you to finish it by the due date?

In late January I tested students on their second independent reading book. Students who had read a five hundred page book the first time and students who had not finished the second book used the test period as a study hall. Again, because I had not read all of the books my students had chosen, I wrote a generic prompt:

PART 1: Due at the end of the period.

- Give the title and author of your book. Summarize what happened in it in such a way that I will understand the plot.
- Choose the most unforgettable scene, describe it fully, and tell why that scene affected you as it did.

PART 2: Due at the beginning of class tomorrow.

- Tell me in detail why you chose the book.
- Thoroughly describe your process of reading this book: When did you read, for how long? When did you finish? How did you feel as you were reading it?

The results were better this time. In first period, seventeen out of thirty-four students had read books; in second period, twenty out of thirty-five had. For the second test, some students chose new books and some finished books they had started for the previous assignment. More significant than the results on the Part 1 recall and analysis sections were the comments on Part 2 about choices and processes:

Craig: I grabbed this book because I knew I could finish it fast. What can I say? I was in the mood for some cheese-ball action.

Jeannine: I chose *The Temple of My Familiar* because I like Alice Walker.

Kandi: My aunt told me about this book — she read it two times.

Whatever the reason for choosing a book, once students were into it, most of them finished. Students, like Tachia, who had not read the first book, finished the second one:

I loved *The Street* because it related to the streets around where I live. It's interesting to learn about the struggle of some Black poor people trying to go somewhere in life. . . . I read the book daily when possible, usually after I had done my other homework. I finished early.

As I read these comments and listened to the discussion in my classroom, I was filled with excitement. Changes were taking place in students' knowledge about and enthusiasm for reading. Students were recommending books to each other and were asking each other for recommendations:

Tassie: If you don't read any other book this year, read *Disappearing Acts!*

Kema: Jalaine, do you know a good book for me — not one you'd like, one I'd like.

They were also asking me for books to read. "Now don't get me wrong," Kandi said one day after class, "but are there *any* Black books that aren't about slavery?" I discovered they were even asking other teachers for books: "I hope it's okay with you that I told Rebecca to read an Anne Rice," a science teacher told me one morning. "I'm a total science fiction freak and Anne Rice is my favorite."

Along with my excitement came questions: What had brought about the change in Kema? In December she had written, "I have not read my independent book like I'm supposed to. I think to have an independent book was a burden on me and it makes me feel guilty." In January she was writing, "*Mama* is so good. I got it yesterday and I can't believe I'm on page 53. This book has 260 pages so I'll be able to finish it by Wednesday because of the long weekend." Why was Nikki, a University of California-bound student, not reading? In December she had selected *Beloved* because "schools should teach more works by African American writers" and in January she chose *Mama* "because I've heard a lot about it being a quality novel and it is written by an African American woman," and yet she had finished neither book. Why was it that some students had read several independent books and some, like Nikki, had trouble finishing any?

Looking for Answers

Assuming that what happens to children early in their school careers affects them as learners, I found some insights into my students' reading habits in university research on young children. Work by Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) suggests that a determining factor in my students' success or failure on the independent reading assignments was their self-perception. In their seminal study on the formation of ability constructions, Rosenholtz and Simpson found that children's conceptions of their intellectual ability were "socially constructed during their early school experiences" (p. 55) and that schools "typically 'reproduce' institutionalized ability conceptions because their 'deep structure' produces patterns of performance and performance evaluation that make it logical for children to interpret their academic abilities unidimensionally" (p. 55). Research on self-fulfilling prophecy by Weinstein (1986) stressed the cumulative effect of differential teacher treatment of students. "What begins as small differences in student skills, grows due to coverage differences and to accompanying changes in children's behavior, self-esteem, and motivation" (p. 30). In their work with upper grade elementary school students labeled "poor readers," Brown, Palinscar, and Purcell (1986) found that students who have formulated a negative diagnosis of their ability to succeed in school display "a typical pattern of learned helplessness" and "often develop compensatory coping strategies for preserving their self-worth" — strategies that include "devaluation of academic tasks, goals, and desired outcomes, and the justification of a lack of effort" (pp. 123–124).

My own work as a classroom teacher supports the connection between students' self-perceptions about ability and their school performance. For years I have watched students assigned to remedial classes wither, while students in "gifted" classes blossom. I have observed students in low-track classes act out, drop out, misbehave, and "give up and withhold effort . . . because failure given high effort inevitably will imply low ability and generate subsequent feelings of shame" (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1984, p. 54). Students become non-learners as a result of teachers' and their own low expectations. Was my students' success or failure with independent reading a result of their perceptions of themselves as readers? I needed to find out, and so I asked them to write an extended definition of a *reader*, and how they defined themselves in terms of that definition.

– *How "readers" saw themselves:*

Students who identified themselves as readers saw reading as an opportunity to learn, to escape, to experience an adventure. Andrew wrote, "A reader is someone who can pick up a book and be transported to a new place, a place where the writer is in control but the reader is free to fill in the blanks, to view the scene as he wishes to." Students who identified as readers wrote about reading constantly and widely. "A reader," reflected Sarah, in e.e. cummings's style to

capture the need for eclecticism, “is someone who reads — books novels plays newspapers magazines poetry prose, fiction and non-.” “Readers,” students said, read everywhere — waiting in lines, on the BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) train, in classes when they finished assigned work, late at night. Students wrote of finishing a book and starting another immediately, of reading two books at the same time, of getting lost in reading. These “readers” finished books — even books they did not like. They knew where to get books: they wrote of libraries and bookstores and people they could rely on for suggestions. They had lists of books they wanted to read. They read some books more than once. They knew when they had become readers. “When I was in fourth grade,” Keesha said, “I started reading Judy Blume books. That’s how I became a reader. I read one of her books and decided it was good and she had to have more books that were just as good. One book from an author is all it takes.”

– How “non-readers” saw themselves:

Not surprisingly, students who identified themselves as non-readers also saw that being a reader was a matter of action. “They read when they have to and when they don’t,” commented Freddie. Karen noted that “Readers don’t read by chapters — they just read.” According to these students, readers read fast, readers read long books, readers understand what they read, readers don’t quit books. Many students who labeled themselves as non-readers wrote of a change in their lives as readers:

August: When I was in the fourth grade, I was in a class for the gifted or whatever. Our teacher read us a book called *Never Cry Wolf* which she thought was so good. This was my first taste of literature and I hated it. I didn’t want to hear about some man in the freezing cold, studying some wolves. That turned me off from books.

Lan: In my freshman year, I loved all the books [my English teacher] introduced us to, especially *Jane Eyre*. But now, it seems that every time we read a book, we have to analyze it. No matter how easy or hard the book is, we have to analyze what the author is saying.

What did these students do when assigned books for school? “If the book starts out boring, then I’ll just pass and hopefully they’ll have a movie out on it so I can watch it,” wrote Freddie. “I always put off reading it until the last minute,” Sean said. “It’s funny how I work it out. If I start today, I have to read 80 pages a day and if I start next week, I’ll have to read 150 pages a day. I procrastinate until my pages per day ratio is at my personal maximum. Time pressure gets me motivated.”

Self-designated non-readers were adamant about being *able* to read. They saw a real difference between reading habits and reading ability. As Laura commented, “Just because you don’t read book after book, doesn’t mean you can’t read.” In fact, these students’ sixth- and eighth-grade scores on the California Achievement Test supported that distinction in most cases. That is, their scores indicated that in junior high, they were reading close to, at, or above grade level.

The scores of ten self-designated non-readers, however, did reflect reading problems. One, a special education student, scored in the eighteenth percentile, two scored in the high twenties, one in the thirty-first, and the rest in the fortieth percentiles in total reading. These students defined the act of reading quite differently from their “reader” and other “non-reader” classmates. For them, reading was not a comprehension activity, but a decoding skill or a performance opportunity. Nate wrote, “My life as a reader has been hell!! Don’t get me wrong I can read, but it’s just I hate doing it. I seem to have a little studdering [sic] problem and there’s nothing more embarrassing when you’re reading is to studder [sic].”

From my reading of students’ reflections on themselves as readers and on the work they did in class, I drew the following general conclusions:

1. High grades did not necessarily correspond with the students’ self-designation as a reader. Among those who saw themselves as readers were students who had earned straight A’s or close to straight A’s and students whose grade point averages were as low as 2.0 and 1.97. Low grades and self-designation as a non-reader, however, did correlate.
2. High SAT scores did not necessarily correspond with a student’s self-designation as reader. Some students with combined SAT scores as low as 470 saw themselves as readers and others with scores as high as 1400 labeled themselves non-readers.
3. Among high-achieving students, both readers and non-readers, no relationship existed between self-perception and performance on the independent reading assignments. Whatever label they gave themselves, high-achievers completed the independent reading. Among low-achieving students, however, a relationship did exist. That is, low-achievers who labeled themselves as non-readers did not do the reading. The only exception to this self-perception/ performance association was a group of five low-achievers who said they were readers but did not finish one independent book. These students, all young women, typically wrote statements about the place of reading in their lives using language that suggested that sounding like a reader and knowing the names of writers and works were as important as actually doing the reading. Alice, for example, declared, “I go through stages where I live, breathe, eat, and sleep with a book in my hand.” Jalaine, a high-achiever, was the only example of a deflation rather than an inflation of self-perception: she identified herself as a non-reader, when a good deal of evidence pointed to the contrary. Jalaine wrote that although she reads, she does not see herself as a reader because “I can’t really get into books until I read a really good one. Once I do, I hunt for as many books by that author as I can. If I can’t find any, I listen to what other people (mostly college students) are saying about books they’re reading and then I go read those. . . . If I like a book, I read until I’m done with the entire book.” The fact that she had so many books that she liked highlighted a seeming contradiction in her refusal to identify herself as a reader. Among her favorites: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Color Purple*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Crime and Punishment*. When

interviewed about her seeming self-mislabeling, Jalaine grew adamant. “No, I am not a reader. I read but I am not a reader. You want me to change what I wrote and I don’t want to. I AM NOT A READER!” Her insistence on differentiating between reading a lot and being a reader intrigued me. What was she telling me that I couldn’t hear?

4. School labels related to reading ability — “remedial,” “average,” and “fast” — did not necessarily affect the labels students used for themselves. While some students attributed their being non-readers to school, the majority of the self-designated non-readers did not blame school. Clifton stated, “There are two things that make me the reader I am: procrastination and laziness. . . . Reading is a bit like having a foreign accent. If you don’t use it, you lose it.”

In fact, several students saw themselves as readers despite a school label to the contrary. Frank identified himself as a reader, even though “in elementary and junior high I always, I mean *always*, scored below average in reading” and was “*always* assigned to below average reading groups and English classes.” Rahima adamantly declared herself a reader despite being labeled a remedial student in seventh grade. “When I was in fourth grade, I read a lot and they wanted to skip me up to fifth grade but my mom didn’t want me to do that. In seventh grade they put me in a dumb class, a reading class, with kids who couldn’t read. I kept telling them I was in the wrong class, but they didn’t believe me. So I just sat and read by myself. Then one day I got into a fight and when the principal called me in to suspend me, she checked my records. She asked me why was I in that reading class and I *told* her I had told them it was a mistake. The next day they moved me to the right class.”

— *Another category* — a “*somewhat*” reader:

While most students designated themselves as readers or non-readers, several students were not comfortable with either label. “I think I am almost a reader,” wrote Rebecca. “It wasn’t until this year that I realized I liked reading and that reading doesn’t have to be a task — it can be fun.” Antoinette noted, “I believe I am becoming a reader. I am a beginning reader. I am beginning to read books on my own with pleasure.” “I am somewhat of a reader,” said Rob.

As I studied what these students had to say about readers and reading, I saw that they were indeed in between the two categories of reader and non-reader. This group of students had a hard time finding books, they procrastinated about starting books, and they often chose to watch TV rather than read, but once they got into a book, they read it. They also read newspapers and periodicals regularly and saw reading as valuable. “I know that if I was encouraged to read,” Patty said, “I would read more.”

Creating Readers: Was the Answer a New Curriculum?

As helpful as the research and student reflections were, they did not answer my question about how to transform students into readers. I needed to look further. I decided to focus on my second-period English class, a broad mix of students

who had not elected to take Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature or AP English Language and Composition, or who had not completed the required summer work for those classes. Of the thirty-five enrolled in my second-period class, eight were labeled “certified gifted” and three were labeled “special ed.” Students’ academic interests and achievement levels varied widely: there were students who were taking calculus and those who had never taken algebra; students who were in French V and students assigned to social studies classes for English as a Second Language learners; students who were headed to UC Berkeley and students taking night classes to make up for lost credits so they could graduate with their class in June. Grade point averages ranged from 3.84 to 1.06. Two of the students cut class almost daily, and two others were absent at least once or twice a week. The twenty-three females and twelve males in the class represented almost all of the major racial and ethnic groups at our school, and students were from both the most affluent and poorest parts of our school district.

I chose this class for a variety of reasons. First, it included six “somewhat” readers, a group that intrigued me. What was it that held them back, made them tentative? What would it take for them to become real readers, students who would choose to read on their own for pleasure and knowledge? Second, of my four classes of seniors, second period had the widest range of students in terms of academic achievement. What I learned from studying them might help me in other classes and in my advocacy to end tracking schoolwide. And finally, unlike my AP English Language and Composition class, where the curriculum almost demanded I spend the third quarter preparing students for the national AP examination, the curriculum in English 4 was open. We had completed our school district’s required readings and had practiced writing the required discourse modes. I was free to experiment, free to try out my belief about the role written reflection might play as a tool to affect students’ perceptions of themselves as learners.

I decided to make independent reading the focus of the second semester and then to arrange all other reading and writing activities around it. Since many “readers” had expressed pleasure in reading books by and about people who shared their race or ethnicity, I thought that “somewhat” readers and “non-readers” might enjoy these writers too. The first day of the third quarter, I gave out a new independent reading assignment: read a book written by or about someone in an ethnic or racial group with which you identify. I gave students three days to find a book and then allowed them two days for in-class silent reading.

My new curriculum plan called for alternating whole-class activities with independent reading activities. When students were working on an independent book, homework assignments were mostly limited to that book; I did not ask them to read two novels at the same time or ask them to write at home the essay forms we studied in class. In addition to studying plays and short stories, we spent a good deal of time working on argumentation through discussing current political events — the Rodney King verdict, the national election, the family values issue — and reading and writing argumentative essays on a wide range of topics. We also watched and discussed films, practiced a variety of writing activi-

ties — scholarship essays, letters to next year's seniors, and personal credos — and prepared a piece for the end of the year literary magazine. Along with these activities, I regularly asked students to tell me in writing about their independent reading book. This practice kept me informed of their progress and encouraged them to continue reading at a steady pace. When I felt that students were falling behind, I talked with them about the importance of keeping up with the assignment, helped them get connected to the book, or found them a different book. Occasionally I called parents to enlist their support.

For the second independent reading assignment of the quarter, I asked students to choose a book written by or about someone from a racial or ethnic group of which they were not a member. Again, I allowed a few days of in-class silent reading for them to get into the book, and I gave homework assignments related to the independent reading.

At the end of the third quarter, I had mixed feelings about the results of the independent reading assignments. I was heartened by all the book talk I was hearing in the room and delighted with the quality of the books students were reading: *Mama*, *Animal Dreams*, *Tracks*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Family*, *Migrant Souls*, *Tar Baby*, *Winter in the Blood*, *Spring Moon*, *Vampire Lestat*, *Macho*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Jasmine*, *Lucy*, *Ceremony*, *Yellow Raft in Blue Water*, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, *Slave Girl*, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, *Cider House Rules*, *Iron and Silk*, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, *Black Elk Speaks*. Students' eclectic tastes moved me to ease my rule about novels written in the last ten years. I made exceptions easily, allowing students to read older books, books of short stories, biographies, and non-fiction works. Reading was what mattered, not genre or publication date. Dimming my excitement, however, was the worry that for all of my encouragement and allowances, not all students were reading. Nineteen students finished the first book, eighteen the second. I was particularly concerned about the six students who had read neither book. What would motivate them?

Creating Readers: The Emergence of Talk as an Answer

The first day of the fourth quarter was unusual. About one-third of the students in second period were absent, out of class to set up for a school carnival. Rather than begin a new lesson, I told students they could use the period as a study hall. But as I looked around at who was present, it occurred to me that there were several students who had done all of the independent reading assignments. Why not use the period to interview them? I escorted them into a small workroom adjacent to my classroom and said I wanted them to talk about themselves as readers — their history as readers, their process of reading, and whatever else that came up about reading. Because I did not want to lead or impede their discussion, once I got them started talking, I left them alone — with the tape recorder on. When I returned forty minutes later, they were involved in a lively sharing of most loved and most hated books. In the last few minutes of their discussion, I asked them for ideas about where we needed to go during the rest

of the year with independent reading. They wanted to read books that they hadn't read in high school, "missed classics" that they thought would be expected of them as college freshmen. *And* they wanted to discuss the books. I laughed when I heard this — why hadn't I thought of adding "talk" to the independent reading project? Talk had been the main focus of the books we had studied as a class, and I had forgotten its importance when I moved to independent reading.

That night, as I listened to the tape, I was moved by my students' passion and the breadth of their reading:

Jalaine: When I was in tenth grade, I read this book called *Wuthering Heights*. And at first I would've never . . . just, just, picked that book up. But it was — I don't know — it was weird. Because the teacher was like "Well, read it and you'll understand it." And I did. And I thought that was kind of neat because, you know, I wouldn't never just read it myself . . . because it was . . . like a fifteenth century book.

Phillipa: I always wanted to read that book.

Jalaine: It was, it was hecka good, it was . . .

Phillipa: It's a love story, isn't it?

Jalaine: Yeah, yeah, and when you pick it up and stuff you wouldn't think it was good. And there's scandal in there and . . .

Phillipa: It's not filled with that Shakespeare stuff?

Jalaine: No, it's not really a lot of Shakespearean language. It's just — at times it will be . . . but it's hecka good.

Phillipa: I'm about to read it then. What's it called?

Jalaine: *Wuthering Heights*. I forgot who wrote it, though, but she has a sister.

David: Bronte.

Jalaine: Bronte! Bronte! And she has a sister who writes books, too, and . . . uh . . . I think my tenth-grade English teacher . . . Mr. Martin . . .

Antoinette: I remember him.

Jalaine: The one who used to ride a bike all the time . . .

Phillipa: Yeah, with a backpack.

Jalaine: Yeah, introduced us to them. The Bronte sisters — and that was when I started really reading a whole lot of stuff. Now I even read science fiction books.

They talked about becoming readers:

Antoinette: It was last year when I got into Black literature and started reading books that I enjoyed. Because at first I didn't think I was a reader because the books we read, I couldn't . . . relate to things and it was . . . I don't know . . . but after I started reading books that I liked . . . I could . . . I went back to read those same books and I could read them with an open mind. I didn't think I was [a reader] because I didn't think I was getting the point that everyone else was and because I felt I was reading books just for the class — which I was — but now I read things on my own, instead of just for the class.

Rob: I haven't been a reader all that long. A couple of years ago — even last year — I wasn't. I wasn't really. I couldn't be called a reader. I didn't read the books really. I just scammed through.

Antoinette: Aren't you afraid to take the test though?

Jennifer: What happened when the teacher picked the wrong place — the part you scammed through?

Rob: Well, you know, see, you've just got to play it off. See, well, I'd just read a little bit of it. I'd always be . . . the night before the test, I'd always be somewhere around page 50 of the book so I'd know some of the characters, you know. You know, I could wing it through because a lot of the time the books were old books that I already knew something about. I just didn't read 'em. I was on the wrong side of the tracks. But, but . . .

Jalaine: What changed you over then?

Rob: I really, I really can't say. I came into this class and I think I just had a different mentality, a mentality of . . .

Antoinette: Because we're seniors. [Laughter]

Rob: Something — I wanted, you know, I wanted to work hard and uh, uh, I guess, uh, I just wanted to . . . I knew I could do it. I just didn't 'cause I was being lazy. So I said, "this is, like, the time to just go all out" and I s'pose . . . I mean, I've read all the books in the class and took all the tests and, uh, so I'm just now becoming a reader, really. I 'spose. But see, it's still different, because I might watch — if given the choice, you know, I might still watch the news instead of reading the newspaper or something.

They talked of books — their favorites, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Beloved*, *Cider House Rules*, *The Bluest Eye*; books they wanted to read or reread, *1984*, *Animal Farm*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Hamlet* ("Is that the 'to be or not to be' one?"); books they had not understood, *Woman Warrior*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Joy Luck Club*.

Jennifer: Another hard book is *Beloved*.

Jalaine: That's weird. Because I picked that up and read it straight through. I don't know. It was good — to me. I had read other Toni Morrison books and I kind of understood her style. I had read *The Bluest Eye* and then I read something else, I can't remember . . .

Phillipa: *Sula*?

Jalaine: Yeah, *Sula*. And then I said, "Well, I'm going to read *Beloved* now." It was different, but it was the same. She, like, used her style — the normal style that she did in the other two books — but she added stuff, like with the baby character, the ghost spirit — whatever you want to call it. That was different. You could understand why. I liked the book myself. And then I was listening to an interview she did on TV with that guy on Channel 9 [Bill Moyers on PBS] and she was kind of explaining it and I was, like, "Yeah, that's true, that's true." You know, it was, to me, it was, *Beloved* was easy to read. And I read it in like in a weekend. I read it while I was eatin' dinner and in the tub. All weekend.

They asked each other questions: Can you read anywhere? Can you read a book in one night? What do you do when a book starts out boring?

They talked about the “gaps” they saw in their reading education:

Phillipa: When I was in ninth grade we had this crazy teacher and we didn't get to read much. The lady was crazy! Miss _____. Remember her? Remember her? She was crazy. The only book I remember reading was *Animal Farm*. And I feel like I've missed out on a lot of ninth-grade reading — that everyone else, that ninth-grade classes read, that I still didn't get to read. I still haven't read *Mice and Men*. There was another book I wanted to read and I haven't read it.

[Here I returned to the room and, because I couldn't resist, entered the discussion.]

Cone: So, sometimes teachers don't hit on books you think you should read because . . . they're a part of the “conversation?” Like everyone has read *Of Mice and Men* so you should read it? But sometimes students don't want to read those books — the books that you're “supposed” to read.

Jennifer: But even though you don't want to read them, you need to be exposed to them, or you feel left out. . . . I mean, like she [Phillipa] says — she might not like *Mice and Men* but now she's regretting not having read it because she can't be part of the conversation. And she feels neglected. Even if you don't like a book at least it helps to be exposed to it and make the choice from there, you know, instead of not knowing whether you would have liked it or not.

As I listened, I also discovered the reason Jalaine had labeled herself a non-reader. “I signed up for AP,” Jalaine began. “I read the first book. I read it to the best of my ability. So my [required summer] paper on this book was like fifteen pages. I sent it to Ms. Cone's house and about a week later I got this postcard saying, ‘You did not read this book thoroughly. Pleeeeassee rewrite the summary.’ I said, ‘Oh, no. I spent fifteen dollars for this book and she's telling me to read it and write again — oh, no, I'm not.’ I said, ‘I'm not reading it over again. And, um, I just got really discouraged when she said I didn't read it. I read it and she said I didn't read it.’” Reflecting on Jalaine's comments, it's little wonder that when I asked her to label herself, she wrote “non-reader”: my rejection of her paper was a rejection of her as a reader.

The next day in class I suggested the “missed classic” idea for their next book. I said it was fine with me if they didn't all want to read the same book, but that whichever book they chose, they needed to read it well enough to discuss it in a group. The assignment that night was to think of a book they had always wanted to read, bring their suggestion to class the next day, and convince a group of classmates to read it with them and discuss it. The titles they came back with were revealing. No one proposed *Jane Eyre*, *Animal Farm*, or *Brave New World* — not even the students who had suggested on the tape that they wanted to “fill in the gaps” in their reading history. They did not suggest books on the basis of what might impress a college. They wanted to read more current literature: *Disappearing Acts*, *Slaughterhouse 5*, *Her*, *The Color Purple*, *Speaker for the Dead*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Students made their choice and agreed to get a copy of the book they had selected. Four days later they met with their group leader (the student who had suggested the book) to decide how they wanted to begin the reading. The next two days in class, students met in their groups — in the classroom or in an adjacent empty classroom — either to read aloud or silently.

I joined the science fiction group, mainly to show the leader of that group that I wasn't as narrow-minded about science fiction as he had accused me of being. As I read the book, I found myself procrastinating, falling asleep, resisting rereading parts I was confused about, hating what I judged as silly pseudo-scientific language, disliking the characters, not caring about the action. I was irritated with myself for choosing the book and wished that I could find an audio tape of the book to listen to on my drive to school so that I didn't have to waste reading time on it. When I realized what was happening to me, I laughed out loud: my resistance to a book I did not want to read had turned me into a Freddie, a Karen, an August. I had taken on the characteristics of a non-reader.

The date for the book discussion arrived, and I was filled with apprehension, not for the students, but for me. Not because I hadn't finished my book — the achiever in me had pushed me through it — but because two visitors were coming. Carol Tateishi, Director of the Bay Area Writing Project, University of California at Berkeley, and Richard Sterling, Director of the Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College, City University of New York, wanted to observe the class as part of their study of the work of teacher researchers. The source of my apprehension was the largest independent reading group, the students reading *Disappearing Acts*. The day before, the leader of the group, Keesha, had told me that she and two other strong discussants in the group were going to miss the next day because of a field trip.

"What about the discussion?" I asked them. "Who's going to lead it?"

"Clifton says he'll do it," they told me.

My heart sank. Clifton has not finished one book all year.

"Clifton," I moaned. "Isn't there anybody else?"

"Don't worry," they reassured me, "he's reading the book."

When class began the next day, we moved into our discussion groups. Tateishi joined the *Malcolm X* group, Sterling went to Clifton's group, I went to my group. Occasionally, I looked around: all was going well. Every group was involved in animated talk. Clifton's group seemed the most excited. I relaxed.

At lunch I met with the visitors who were full of praise for the students' choice of books and the quality of their talk. When I shared my fears about Clifton's leading the group, Sterling assured me that Clifton had met the challenge. He knew the book, he was engaged with the characters, and he insisted that everyone participate in the discussion. When one girl tried to get out of answering by saying she felt the same as the last student who had spoken, Clifton said, "You know you can't get away with that in here — what do *you* think?"

For their last book, I asked students to read *Walkabout*, by James V. Marshall. The book, a story of racial and cultural misunderstanding and tragedy, seemed a fitting final project after our reading of books from the many cultural, ethnic, and racial groups in our class. This time I allowed no in-class reading and gave students a deadline of one week to finish the book. I wanted to give them practice in reading a book on their own in a short amount of time and I wanted to see what they would do with a book of my choosing. Twenty-nine out of thirty-five read the book.

Instead of a final examination, I asked second-period students to do a series of writings based on the reading they had done over the course of the year. I was particularly interested in their views about the place of independent reading in a high school curriculum and what suggestions they had for me that would improve my teaching. Students who had not done the independent reading — any or all of it — did not want the independent assignments. The great majority of students, however, found real value in it. Amaka wrote, “Independent reading should be a requirement for each grade level in high school.” “If I were a teacher, I would make it mandatory to read at least three independent books a semester to pass my class,” commented Phillipa. And Jalaine observed, “Independent reading should be a class in itself. It gets you motivated to read.”

Among their suggestions for the next year:

Keesha: Let the class have more of their own picks on books they want to read and less of the requirements. Every student cannot get into Shakespeare’s thou’s and art’s and thee’s. Why should we have to be required to know them? Less requirements will make a lot of difference.

Angel: I think that independent reading should divide equally with chosen reading — meaning, we should read independently as much as we read in school. The reading we did this year in and out of class let me know that I am a diverse reader, that I can read many different styles of literature and like them.

Jenna: Add Stephen King.

Wilson: Let students read non-fiction.

David: I hereby suggest to English teachers that they drop the hatred they have for science fiction. The prejudice I see of the medium of science fiction is annoying.

Creating Readers by Creating Community: “C’mon, Girl, You Got to Read It.”

By the end of the year, most students in second period wrote about positive changes in their perceptions of themselves as readers. Kema’s written reflections illustrate the kind of change that took place:

September 16th: The only book I have read on my own was *Daddy Cool* by Donald Gaines and *Heart of a Woman* by M. Angelou. . . . When and if I have an assignment to read a book, I do all my other homework first because I know if I pick that book up I would get restless especially if I don’t want to do it. I know it’s sad, but that how I feel.

January 27th: No! I do not see myself as a reader because I’m very picky about what I read. . . . I don’t consider myself a reader especially in this class where I’m compared against students who have been on honor roll all of their lives. I would never take the chance to read or do any other things they do. Why? because that’s how it is. [I chose the last book] because it is written by a female which happens to be black. She’s telling my story. How I feel inside. What I see in life. What I’m going to get out of life. Terry McMillan is a powerful writer.

February 24th: Most of the books I have read in the past were fairy tales. I wanted to read something that I can apply to my life that might help me in the future — especially if it is by an African American writer. I stated [at the beginning of the year] that there is not a lot of them out there but boy was I wrong. At first I hated this book assignment. Now I'm getting used to it. I'm finding me in each one of the books I read. I don't like how things end sometimes but that's part of life. I read when I have time. Like when I'm not working or not at school. With these last two books I've read, I hate to put them down because they didn't bore me. I just had other things to do.

April 9th: I don't consider myself a reader yet. I'm getting there though. It's probably because I couldn't find something to read written by a true black woman until I read books by Terry McMillan. That's when I found myself trying to read more and more. . . . Until this year I hated reading with a passion until I learned how to pick out books that interested me.

May 24th: I didn't think I'd make it with *Walkabout*. I couldn't get into that book. Keesha kept telling me, "C'mon, girl, you got to read it — it's good." But I kept asking, "Why I can't see how good it is?" But then I got to the part where the boy died and it was good — just like Keesha said. . . . I still feel intimidated with some kids in here — kids like Keesha and Jalaine and David, especially David. He is never without a book. But I read all my books this year, every one of them. The other day Keesha and me were at the mall and we saw this bookstore and we thought we saw you in there. Keesha said, "There's Joan, let's go in." But it wasn't you. We saw Toni's new book and Keesha want to buy it but it's too expensive so she'll wait 'til it comes out in paperback.

What had brought about the change so clearly in Kema and in other students' perception of themselves as readers? As I made sense of what had happened over the year, I saw that it was not the freedom to choose books, not the independent reading assignments themselves, not the students' reflections on themselves as readers that had brought about the change. It was the combination of all those things — choice, assignments, reflections — in a community of readers that had brought about the change. The secret was creating the community in which students could chose books, read them, talk about them, and encourage each other to read.

I realize now that creating that community had started early in the year with my belief in talk as a way to create an environment where students of all ability levels could succeed, something I had worked on with AP students but had experienced only limited success with in other classes (Cone, 1992). From the first book we read in second period, I stressed the need for students to assist each other in making meaning together. We started with *Sula*. The first day, Melissa asked, "What's up with Shaddrack — are his fingers really growing or is he freaking out?" She asked what other students were afraid to ask and thereby set an example for them. As we made our way through books, students asked questions of each other, cleared up confusions, defended their analysis, reinterpreted the text with each other — and in doing so, taught each other how to read and analyze literature. "Did Sula plan to kill Chicken Little?" "That's not right — Sula doing that with Jude — didn't she know it would hurt Nel? Why'd she come back in the first place?" "What did it mean when it said at the end that

it was Sula Nel missed and not Jude?" And so it went — with novels like *Woman Warrior* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and short stories like "The Tree" and "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." The emphasis was always on asking questions, looking back at the text for substantiation, trying out interpretations, coming to agreement or living with disagreement. Students were creating meaning together and teaching each other. And always, it was writing begetting talk and talk begetting understanding.

On the second day of our study of *Othello*, for example, I asked students to write down everything they knew about the characters from Act I. Phillipa said she knew nothing. "Then write about what you don't know," I told her, "and then we'll talk."

She wrote:

I know I hate Shakespeare. I know I don't understand this play. I know nothing about this stupid play. And I hate it.

Okay, so I know there's this guy named Othello who is a famous soldier and he fell in love with this young girl. Another guy's in love with her, too. I forgot his name. Her name is Desdemona and she eloped with Othello. And there's this other guy who is jealous of Othello and mad at him. He works for Othello, I think. I can't remember why he's mad. Anyway this guy is setting out to destroy Othello. Who is black but Desdemona's dad, who is white, doesn't like him because he's black.

In fact, Phillipa knew a good deal about the play, which she discovered in the course of writing. When she shared that writing with her classmates, they learned from her and she learned from them. They explained the conflict between Iago and Othello, and they filled in the gaps of her understanding just as she had filled in gaps for them. Once they had gotten the first act straight, they could move to the second act. With each piece of literature, students wrote about what they knew and didn't know and then talked about it in a way that cleared up confusion and deepened understanding. With each piece students learned that saying they were confused wasn't going to get them off the hook. "What is confusing?" I'd ask. "What don't you understand?" "If you could ask a question of your classmates, what would you ask?" Gradually they came to see that asking questions was not a sign of stupidity, that getting lost in a book did not mean they had to reread or discard it or cut class until the book was finished, and that when students taught each other, they often explained material in a more accessible way than when teachers explained it. When the time came for the independent reading project, a sense of community had been established along with a sophisticated model for how to read a book.

The extent of our sense of community as readers is reflected in our connection to writer Terry McMillan. Early in the year, Tassie lent me *Disappearing Acts*. "You have *got* to read this. My sister-in-law gave it to me last Friday and I finished it this weekend. Now I'm reading her first book. Don't be shocked by the language." When I finished the book and gave it back to Tassie, she lent me *Mama*. Other girls in first and second period heard of the books, and began reading and recommending them. I bought copies to lend. Gradually a McMillan fan club developed. Kandi wrote, "*Disappearing Acts*. Everywhere I go I hear people talking about that book. I'll read it again right after my aunt is finished with it.

It was so good I just gave it to her and told her to read it and that she'll love it. Sure enough she's in the middle of it and can't put it down. Just last week in my church a woman was reading the book (not in church, at choir practice). She told me that they are going to make a movie out of it. I can't wait to see it." After so much talk about McMillan's work, little wonder that *Disappearing Acts* was one of the books chosen as a group discussion book.

A few days after Clifton had led the discussion on the book, a notice came out in the newspaper advertising McMillan's new book, *Waiting to Exhale*, and a reading by her at a San Francisco bookstore. I told my students I planned to go to the event and said I was going to write a note inviting McMillan to visit our class. "You shouldn't write," Clifton said, "we should." And so they did; they wrote notes and letters to tell her of their admiration. Clifton did not have enough time in class to finish his letter, so he brought it to me at the end of the day, two pages long: "Truthfully I planned to dog-out your book just as I've done everyone else's. I just don't know what happened. As I started to read your book (I do start all the books I'm supposed to read) I found myself unable to leave it alone or put it down. It was almost as if I was addicted to this book. *Disappearing Acts* not only moved me but it became a part of me. Me, a person who doesn't by a long shot consider himself a reader knocked out your masterpiece of writing in less than seven days. I have now started on the book prior to *Disappearing Acts*, *Mama*." His postscript: "Thank you for changing my life. It was a change well needed."

I went to the reading with one of my second-period students and gave McMillan the packet of letters and my classroom phone number. The next morning, at 9 o'clock, she called. "I'd love to visit your class. I've got to meet Clifton." As it worked out, McMillan could not come — she was leaving the next day on her book tour and would not arrive back in the Bay Area until the day before graduation, too late to visit the class. The fact that she had wanted to visit, however, impressed my students. An author was interested in them.

A postscript to the independent reading assignment came with a visit from Kema in October of 1992. She came to visit on Back-to-School Night to tell me of the books she is reading in community college. "I'm waiting for *Waiting to Exhale* to come out in paperback." I told her I'd lend her my copy of it — she could send her younger sister by the next day to pick it up. A month later I got the book back with the following note:

Mrs. Cone,

Thank you for sharing yet another piece of important literature with Kema, Keesha, and I.

Terry McMillan is really a gifted author and we all shared the book with our mothers. We even had a discussion group. I can't thank you enough.

Love,

Your former students,

Jalaine

Kema

Keesha

Creating Students as Readers: Principles for Change

By the end of a year of asking students to write and reflect, I had gotten to know my students as readers — their reading tastes, habits, problems — in a way I had never known them before, and I had come to know high school reading instruction in a way that would dramatically change the way I teach. I reached the following conclusions:

1. High schools can create readers.

In their study, “Poor Readers: Teach, Don’t Label,” Brown, Palinscar, and Purcell (1986) argue that the “effects of inadequate early experiences with the types of knowledge that clarify, elaborate, and extend knowledge can be overcome by providing the missing experience with explicit intervention” (p. 138). My study of senior English students corroborates those findings. Once students learned how to summarize, formulate questions about what they were reading, and discuss text in an environment that encouraged collaborative meaning-making, they gained confidence as readers.

Beyond classroom instruction, other things also encouraged students as readers. Primary among these was the personal connection teachers made with individual students — finding a “match” between writers and students or subject matter and students. Jalaine wrote, “When I was in Black lit, I started reading a whole bunch of different stuff because that’s the kind of teacher Mr. Greene is. He was like, ‘Read Malcolm X,’ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and then ‘Read somebody else’s opinion of the book’ and stuff like that. That happened in the tenth grade and then during that year I had Ms. Gocker and I started reading poetry.”

The use of literature related to students’ lives is also an important element in encouraging students to become readers. Teachers can make these connections by helping students see themselves in books, by choosing books that mirror their experience, and by helping them see the relevance of other people’s stories to their own:

Jennifer: As a child, I never found reading difficult, it just wasn’t enjoyable. We were always forced to go the library, pick out our favorite book, take it home, and that’s all I’d do. Pick out a book, take it home, and return it when it was due. I never found reading could be an enjoyable experience because it was never taught to be fun or interesting, just a lot of words on several pieces of paper. Then as I grew older and entered junior high school, we were assigned books and given more pages to read. This was also not enjoyable because to me it was hard, painful work. Each day we would be assigned a certain number of pages to read, then the following day we would be tested. In my opinion this was not an encouraging or accurate way to get students, like me, to read because there were always other ways of getting the answer to the test. Then finally as I entered high school, reading slowly became more enjoyable. Not because we were forced to read thousands of pages but just because we were being taught how to read and how to make meaning out of what we were reading. I no longer felt inferior to the texts. One of my most favorite books is *Black Boy*. It was my understanding of his triumphs and struggles through life that made the book enjoyable. Finally I was reading something that I felt like I could relate to and most of all understand.

2. High school literature programs need to include independent reading as an integral part of the curriculum.

With very few exceptions, the students in my second-period class who labeled themselves “non-readers” had not been expected to read independently or encouraged by teachers to develop the habit of independent reading. The literature they had previously studied was read in class — mostly aloud — with short reading assignments for homework. When lengthy independent reading was assigned, it was usually for extra credit, an inducement that had little attraction for most of them.

Just as students who were taught in early elementary grades that reading was comprehension had an advantage over students taught that reading was decoding (Brown, Palinscar, & Purcell, 1986), students who were expected to read independently in high school had an advantage over those who were not expected to read on their own. Students who were assigned independent reading matured as readers. Again, Jennifer comments: “I’ve learned to speed read and I know for a fact it will help me in college. When I used to read, I would examine every book, word for word for meaning. Now I know how to scan paragraphs and make meaning out of them — although I must admit that sometimes I reread parts to make sense. Now that I have learned to read faster, reading has become more enjoyable for me because it doesn’t take me so loooonnnnnngggg.”

Asking students to read independently was not new to me. For years I had assigned “outside books.” I took my students to the library, helped them find books, set a deadline for the book to be finished, and tested them with some kind of writing task. But independent reading was not an important part of my curriculum, mainly because readers read the books, and non-readers did not — students who needed no motivation to read got A’s, the rest got F’s. Since independent reading was not a successful activity, I had (except for AP students) nearly discarded it in favor of having all students read the same book together according to a set schedule. That was not such a bad option: I chose books carefully, making sure I mixed complex works and not-so-complex ones to address the reading levels of my students, selected books that reflected the racial and ethnic background of my students, and brought in complementary films, essays, and short stories.

My study of the reading habits of students pointed out what was wrong with my avoidance of independent reading for all students: the longer I chose the books and assigned the pages, the more I reinforced my students’ reading dependence on me, the teacher. More importantly, in not setting aside time for independent reading, I was not encouraging students to practice the comprehension skills they were learning in class, skills that I was carefully scaffolding with discussions and writing assignments. When I did not ask students to use those skills on their own, I was, in effect, implying that they either could not apply the skills on their own or they did not need to read independently — both messages that potentially reinforced their negative self-perceptions as learners.

3. *High school literature programs need to provide an opportunity for students to choose texts.*

For five students in second period, choice made no difference: with or without the right to choose a book on their own, they did not read. As Nina explained, "I didn't really choose not to read a book. I just never got around to reading one. I really don't know what your [sic] looking for in a book for us to read. I would like to read one by a Hispanic author, but I have no idea how to really find one. I know if I tried I could but I really didn't." For a few others — readers, non-readers, somewhat-readers — choice was of little consequence. "Actually I preferred having no choice at all. I read what I'm assigned. I'd much rather read books that were already chosen. For the next year, less choice," wrote Sam. But most students saw choice as essential in getting students to read. Rebecca was enthusiastic: "Reading in class and out of class this year has let me explore a part of my world I never knew. It has given me a great sense of pride and accomplishment. I never really read until this year and I like it. I've read all the books except the last independent one. I've read more books this year than in my whole life put together. I've read from mysteries to vampire books to romances — a wide variety. I know now I can develop a good habit, reading. I can do it!"

For some students, choice provided the opportunity to pursue an interest in a specific genre, author, or issue. Jennifer was one of these students: "I hate to limit myself right now, but I'm going through a phase. An Alice Walker phase. All the books that I have read have been from Black writers because I find those interesting and I like to see how each writer is different." And Angel explained her preference: "I am really into reading books that involve a struggle of some type. Sometimes it makes me sad to read these kinds of books, but at the same time I can't keep my hands away from them."

For others, choice built confidence. "After I finish a book," wrote Kandi, "I feel as if I'm a whole different person. I don't know how to explain it, but I feel powerful, like I'm getting smarter or something." "When I didn't have to read the same thing as the person in front of me, I didn't have to worry about whether or not I got behind in the assigned reading. I took a chance with reading *House of Spirits* because it was really long and political which intimidated me a little. But I read it and I enjoyed it," Tassie wrote.

Advocating that students be given a choice of literature does not imply that books traditionally taught as part of the canon should be eliminated. Readers, somewhat-readers, and non-readers alike often chose traditionally taught books as well as other, more contemporary, stories as their favorites. Common favorites included the following: *Grapes of Wrath*, *The Great Gatsby*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Cider House Rules*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X, 1984*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Sula*, *Black Boy*, *Disappearing Acts*, *The Color Purple*. Most students saw a need to balance teacher-selected books and student-selected books. Angel summed up her feel-

ings: "I think it was a good idea [to have a choice] because we got to read books that the teacher liked and felt we should read, plus what we liked. In class we read books like *Sula*, *Woman Warrior*, *Othello*, *Pygmalion* and *A Doll's House*, all of which were pretty good reading but honestly speaking, I wouldn't have picked those books up at the library. But I'm glad we read them."

4. *Literature teachers need to make talk an essential part of reading.*

Besides assisting students with understanding sophisticated text, talk inspired by writing can create a classroom atmosphere in which the most and least able reader can collaborate in making meaning and can learn from each other by sharing their insights, experiences, questions, and interpretations:

Phillipa: I don't think I could read [*Romeo and Juliet*] by myself because I don't like Shakespeare and . . . and it's easier when you do in class because you can talk about it and . . . Like a person like Shakespeare — you can understand it better if, you know, if you talk about it.

Jennifer: And make it interesting like when we read *Othello*.

Jalaine: You know how she'd [the teacher] say like, "Othello, what's up with you?" And, "Cassio, what's up with you?"

Phillipa: Really, really. I wouldn't have understood at all if we didn't review.

Jennifer: She'd say, "Desdemona, what happened" and I'd go like "Uh, uh," and Jalaine'd say, "Remember — " then something would trigger in my mind and I'd say, "Oh, okay," and I could go on and expand from there. But just off the bat if she'd say, "Here's a test," everyone would be going, "What's number one?"

Creating Readers: Inviting Everyone into the Conversation

Rob wrote at the end of the year about his transformation into a reader, "I now consider myself a reader. Before I didn't read books. I did not consider myself a reader. But I've read every book assigned this year, class book and independent reading book. After I finished my last book I saw a book lying on my shelf. A *Summer Life* by Gary Soto. I don't know how it got there or who put it there but I picked it up and I began reading it. I began reading a book for no ulterior motive. I can't remember the last time I did that. I wanted to read for no one but myself, my own quest for further knowledge, my own enjoyment. I am a reader and I owe it all to this class. I've unlocked a chest full of hidden desire and emotion toward reading that I didn't know was there. Who knew?"

As successful as Rob's final reflection made me feel, I knew that for every Rob and Kema there were also Cliftons and Amakas graduating from high school, just beginning to see themselves as readers, as well as Nikkis and Nates who were leaving high school not having read a single book on their own. And that continues to sadden and concern me.

The issue of reading instruction, like most pedagogical issues, is a political one. Who are the students taught early on that reading is meaning-making, and who are the students taught that reading is decoding? Which students are asked

to read on their own and which are not given independent reading assignments? What are the consequences when an education system invites one group of students to see themselves as independent thinkers and another to remain dependent on teacher instruction and teacher motivation?

If teachers intend for students to leave school as readers — to say nothing of leaving with positive perceptions of themselves as learners — then teachers must make dramatic changes in reading and literature instruction in ways that assist students in reading thoroughly and thoughtfully, encourage them to read on their own, and help them to develop the habit of reading.

At the end of the school year, Jennifer asked, “Ms. Cone, do you teach ninth graders the same as us?”

I replied, “After this year, yes.”

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