

LITERACY 101

Questions and answers that meet the needs
of real teachers in K-12 classrooms

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Introduction

Blessed is the one who readeth...

Revelation 1:3

Watching my young grandchildren as they join the literacy club has caused me to reassess my thoughts on how we help our students grow in their reading, writing, and proficiency with technology. I've had to take stock of where I am in my professional and personal life right now, in this space and time. I teach a course in literacy to teachers taking graduate degrees, and each year I wade through the journal articles, the new books, and the websites, I attend the major conferences on literacy and language arts, I talk to my colleagues at my university and other schools, and I visit and work with teachers in their classrooms on issues of practice. And still I have questions about how we can best support our students in developing their meaning-making processes with the texts they meet, inside and outside school. But this makes sense when you "read" the continually changing world in which children, including my grandkids, will find themselves, and how we as teachers will have to respond in order to adapt our pedagogy and practice to their needs and wishes.

I began my career in the fall of 1958 teaching forty-two grade-five students at a school in Hamilton, Ontario. The principal helped me establish a timetable, and reading was to happen each day from 11:00 until noon, after a spelling time from 10:30 until 11:00. Each week there would be one writing period, called "creative writing." On Friday afternoons, all the students would gather in the gym from 3:00 to 4:00 to watch a film. That comprised the literacy component of my life as a teacher.

During the second week of term, a reading consultant arrived at my door with forty-five books. There were fifteen copies each of three titles: *Young Canada Reads* for the "low" group, *Gay Adventurers* for the middle group, and *Proud Processions* for the gifted. I was to be the pilot teacher for a project called Three Group Reading. The students would be divided into three groups by ability; there were enough of the three different texts for fifteen students in each group, but the manuals had not arrived (nor did they ever). I was instructed to write twelve

questions on the board for each group to answer. This would keep them occupied as I brought one group at a time to sit on the floor at the front; the students would then take turns reading the selections aloud, one by one. Later, I was to mark all of their answers in their notebooks.

I was a totally ineffective reading teacher. The students droned on reading aloud one after the other, we never explored any strategies for improvement, and their answers were marked in their notebooks and never discussed. I would have continued this way, I suppose, for years, except for classroom visits by the English supervisor for Hamilton schools, William H. Moore, who opened for me the world of literacy and literature. He demonstrated and shared such wonderful classroom practices as reading aloud engaging novels to the class, reading powerful poems aloud with the students, using the public library as a resource for bringing personal choice to the students' reading, having students write poems and stories from their life experiences, incorporating small group discussions within every lesson, buying dictionaries and thesauruses for students to use when they wanted them, and most important, he taught us all to use dramatization and role-playing as responses to the texts we were reading. The students became what they had read, through drama activities, and I found a way to be inside my own teaching and alongside my students.

All these strategies became part of mainstream language arts and English teaching over the next decades. Bill Moore's teachings were supported and strengthened by the dozens, if not hundreds, of research projects carried out by educators in government, universities, and school districts, and interpreted by excellent teachers who began writing books for teachers about their classroom practice, backed by the strong research now available.

Patricia Alexander and Emily Fox, in their article "A Historical Perspective on Reading Research and Practice, Redux," offer us a historical and critical review of the different perspectives and lenses that frame the different issues and concerns of educators in how to research and teach the process of reading. In great detail and with scholarly insights, they cover the theoretical conceptions about the learner and the learning process that directed policies in teacher preparation and government curricula over the last sixty years. Their work helps us to recognize the changes in the research and the teaching of reading and writing that had such an impact on how we educated new teachers, and how we offered professional development for practicing teachers. We now have to add to this discussion the effects of technology in the classroom and in the out-of-school lives of the students. This overwhelming factor in communication modalities means we need to be aware of the new media and the messaging affected by them.

As school districts require research-based and data-driven learning/teaching events, we will need educators to find ways of interpreting these studies for classroom practice. I have many heroes who have provided me with research in literacy over the decades, too many to list, and throughout this book I will include supportive texts for teachers in the margins next to the issues under consideration.

I have tried to share my understanding of the current teachings in literacy and their implications for how children become readers and writers of different types of texts. The queries I received from Larry Swartz's teacher candidates, as detailed in his foreword, forced me to re-think and re-search what we now consider effective processes and strategies in the new frames for literacy. Using these core questions has given me a structure for collecting my thoughts on many of

the present issues concerning literacy learning and teaching, and I hope they will provide an overview of where we are in our research and practice.

These are the questions of teachers who want to continue to grow as professionals, and my thoughts about those queries, from my computer to your challenges. A teacher I met at a conference in New York came up to me at the close of my talk and, with tears in her eyes, asked me, “How do you get to be a good teacher?” Spontaneously I replied, “By hanging around good teachers.” And I have referred in this book to many readings of and conversations with good educators that have helped me in my reflections, and I hope that my responses to students’ questions will lead to more questions that may help us move closer to maximizing how students learn about and through literacy, and how we can best support them on their journeys.

David Booth
Toronto, June 2016

We cannot know through language what we cannot imagine...
Those who cannot imagine cannot read.

Elliot Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*

WORDS MATTER...

words we hear
words we read
words we know
words we chant
words we sing
words we recognize
words we read aloud
words that make us laugh
words we take apart
words we solve
words we construct
words with patterns
words we string together
words that tell stories
words that share information
words that puzzle us
words we love
words we write
words that have families
words from our elders
and
words we are given as gifts