

One Student at a Time: The Fight Against Alliteracy* in High School

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June 2009

Elvia looked up from the pages of figures she had been studying. Robynne Flower had just walked through the door of the library on her way to her classroom. She was just the person Elvia wanted to speak with. Elvia McClane was the Librarian at Jackson High School and Robynne Flower taught eleventh and twelfth grade English. Jackson High was an urban school with an enrollment of 1500 students. Many of the students were economically disadvantaged and second language learners. Teachers were very concerned about low reading levels among many student populations and lack of interest in reading among nearly all the students.

“Robynne, I was just looking at the Gates-MacGinitie assessment of student reading levels, and I think you should see them.”

Robynne stopped and turned toward Elvia, “I have to get to class before the bell, but I promise I will be in right after school to check on the scores. Thanks for letting me know they’re in, I’ve been waiting to see them.” Elvia smiles as Robynne rushed out of the opposite door. The bell rang and soon students and their teacher poured through the door to do research for a class project. Juan comes strolling in with a pass, a book, and his headphones under his hat. “Juan, you know that you must have the hat off and the headphones put away in the library,” Elvia prompted.

Juan looks up a little sheepishly, “I’m sorry Ms. McClane, I was thinking about the game tonight and getting a job, I guess I forgot about the library rules.” Juan quickly took off his hat and headphones. Elvia was glad it was Juan so there was no confrontation.

She continued as if nothing had happened, “I see you brought back the book from English, I guess you finished it.”

Juan grimaced a little, “Yeah, Ms. Flower assigns these books, but you know I would just a soon read *Sports Illustrated* or *Car and Driver*.”

Elvia winced to herself as she knew that the budget cuts would make subscribing to many of the popular magazines nearly impossible for the library. Popular magazines are not seen as a priority by many policy makers in the district. Many students, like Juan, would really miss them since they make up the majority of their non-class reading.

Because Juan was one of the students who was open and easy to talk to, Elvia decided to press the issue a little. “Did you enjoy the book?” she asked.

“It was alright for class,” Juan answered with a vague look on his face and a rather tentative voice. “I have to read it for English. English is required. It was the kind of book you read for English. You know, the old school stuff.” Elvia grimaced a little as she thought to herself: “Hemingway? Old school?”

Elvia continued on, “So, what books do you like to read for fun?”

Juan looked puzzled, “Read...for fun? Well, I really don’t have much time to read. I have basketball practice and I am trying to get a job... homework takes time...I like video games and television better than books.” Elvia smiled but she wished the answer were different since she knew from the testing that Juan, an eleventh grader, had a reading level of 7.2.

“Well, at least you practice reading in English class. I bet you read some when you were in grade school and middle school.” She hopefully replied.

“I guess I did read more then. But we had all those B.E.A.R. nights you know the old ‘Be Enthusiastic About Reading’ program-- and they gave us stuff for reading. I guess that I don’t see the need to do it now. It was kind of the thing to do when all of the class was doing it to get stuff,” Juan smiled a little; “You know we had a lot of fun at those sleepover parties in the gym.”

Elvia smiled back, “I bet you did, and it probably did help you want to read, so that was good.”

“I gotta get back to class. Here’s the book. Can you sign the pass?” Juan seemed anxious to get back to class.

“Of course,” Elvia watched Juan turn up his ipod as he ventured back out into the hall and head off toward class.

Elvia sighed; she knew this lack of reading was common among the students. It was hard for her to understand. She loved books and knowledge and she wanted to pass that on to the upcoming generations, but she just didn’t know how. She had tried different campaigns to get students to read outside of class but she was still struggling with the question: How do you instill the joy of life-long learning through reading? She looked around the library at the rows of books and the group of students doing research for class. How would they explore the winding pathways of new ideas that suddenly occur when you are engaged in reading a story or book for the pure joy of reading? Her concern escalated, as it often did when she pondered the big questions: Aren’t we supposed to help students learn critical thinking skills and develop a quest for knowledge? Won’t we be less a civilization if no one reads Plato? What will happen to *Treasure Island*? She worried that students who don’t read regularly wouldn’t increase their current reading level up to grade level or above.

As the day passed Elvia watched a steady stream of students ebb and flow through the library doors. Ten minutes after the final bell rang, Robynne Flower walked into the library. A few students were working quietly on projects but most picked up and left when the bell rang. Elvia was organizing books to be put back on the shelves when she saw Robynne walk in. “Thanks for coming in. I knew you would be interested in the assessment results.” She moved back to her desk and handed the pages of numbers and facts to the teacher. They sat down at one of the library tables and started to pore over the data.

“You know a lot of our students read pretty well,” Robynne began. “Of course we do have many low performing readers. It’s because some are second language learners and some have other challenges. Looking at the scores, I have to say that I am a little surprised at the low scores of some of the kids. I didn’t realize they were having that much of an issue.” Robynne looked up at Elvia as she identified a possible solution to the problem, “You know I wish there were some way to get them to read books on their own...I’m sure that their reading level would improve if they read more.”

“Robynne, I wonder if there isn’t something we could do to get the kids to read for the joy of reading.” Elvia continued, “I thought of starting a book club but I wondered how I would get guys to come as well as the girls.”

Robynne laughed, “food.”

Elvia looked surprised, “food? are you serious?”

“Well, a little, you see it is not easy to get girls interested in a book club even with Oprah. It is much more difficult to get boys interested. I joke about food since I know that if I want the boys to do a little extra work and I offer food they are more willing to do something.” She paused and breathed a little. “I wish that some of their heroes... you know the pro ball players, the rappers, whoever...were interested in getting boys -- or all kids, for that matter -- to read for pleasure. I think that would make some difference.”

Elvia smiled, “It probably would, but we can’t really do anything about that. I guess we just need to focus on things we can do something about. Robynne, what do you think about me starting a book club here, at Jackson High?”

Robynne thought about it for a moment, “When would it meet? Who would pick the books? Who would you really reach? Are you trying to reach students who don’t read at grade level or just students who already read for pleasure?”

Elvia looked down, “I don’t know the answers but I think you’re asking the right questions. We need some kind of plan to get students to read more. Maybe we can

think about it and bring it up at the staff meeting on Wednesday after the break.” Robynne agreed to think about it and get back to Elvia after the Thanksgiving break.

Elvia went back to organizing books but kept wondering why many kids don't continue to read past elementary school. Sure, there are a few who love to read, but why do we have so many that don't see the advantage of reading? How could they not enjoy the pleasures of a good book? As she continued thinking, her thoughts became more pragmatic. Would rewards be an effective incentive? What effect might peer pressure have on getting students to read outside of class? What kind of program could a school like Jackson High implement on a limited budget?

The following Sunday brought some rain and the Sunday paper. Elvia and her husband George were enjoying the quiet when an advice column for teens caught her eye. This was about the same problem that she was wrestling with. It wasn't just her students that were failing to read. What a revelation! The article talked about illiteracy but it reminded Elvia of a short paper about “*aliteracy*.” At first she had thought it was a typo, but when she read on, *aliteracy* was defined as “the state of being able to read but being uninterested in doing so.” It was small comfort that there were now words for both problem, but, for her, it was more interesting to see that they were spoken of as the same thing. The words of the students in the newspaper were very powerful and revealing: “...the news doesn't interest me because everything is spun and it's overwhelming not knowing what to believe.” Did this mean that students are not taught to go to several sources and then use critical thinking skills to evaluate the information? Another student commented: “I have better things to do, and between homework, sports, and my social life, there's no time.” No time? How is this possible? Maybe time management was something that should be taught. Then, at the bottom of the article was a short paragraph outlining the results of a compendium study in 2007 by the National Endowment for the Arts. The study correlates reading for pleasure, regardless of income, with such things as political activism, cultural participation, even regular exercise, and success in the working world. The last couple of lines caught her eye. “The average 15 to 24 year-old,” according to the study, “spends 2.5 hours per day watching TV and 7 minutes reading. Half the young people 18 to 24 never read for

pleasure, and only a third of high school seniors read at proficiency, the level needed to read ...newspaper(s).” Does this mean that most high school seniors can’t read at the fifth grade level?

George looked up as Elvia began telling him about her discovery. With a half smile he said, “I know you want to change the world, but you might have to look at changing one kid at a time.” Maybe the idea of reading for pleasure could trickle down to one kid at a time. Maybe a Book Club could make a small dent. Elvia wanted to read more of the National Endowment study. She spent the rest of the Thanksgiving week on the computer reading.

After break, and back at school, the week passed and Wednesday morning came. Elvia was in the library when Robynne Flower rushed through on her way from the office to the classroom. “Elvia, will you be available after school today to quickly go over some ideas before the staff meeting?”

“Of course, Robynne, I will be here.”

The day progressed and both the teacher and the librarian were busy and engaged. After school, Robynne Flower came in with a stack of papers. “Elvia,” Robynne began, “after our talk I asked the kids to write about the last book they read for pleasure, and here are the results.” Robynne handed the stack to Elvia, “I spent some time last week going over them and I admit that the students fall into the categories that Kyleene Beers identified.” Elvia looked up questioningly. Robynne continued, “Beers says many students are dormant, uncommitted, or unmotivated. After reading over the students comments, it seems to me that Jackson High has all three types.” Robynne paused and then went on, “We have the test scores and we have a library full of books that have been identified according to reading level. What do you think about us making an individualized book list to help students find books that fit their particular reading level? I just don’t think you will get many to volunteer for extra reading outside school assignments, but with this list, they could locate books that will be far more accessible – and enjoyable – for them to read.”

Elvia tried to absorb the ideas Robynne was expressing. Individual book lists would help students choose books, but it would not necessarily ensure her goal of creating non-assigned reading for fun. Elvia thought before she began to speak, “You know many books for young adult readers are not written at a very high reading level. There are even some that are in a comic book type format, a graphic novel, so they can appeal to a wide range of young readers and reading levels. I have also noticed as I watch the kids in here that many self select popular magazines instead of books.”

“I guess the library has new books for young adult readers, but I don’t really keep up on all of them,” Robynne began, “I know I should, but it really seems like one more thing and usually the subject matter isn’t my cup of tea. How do you manage to keep up with all the titles?”

“I read the reviews and press releases on new young adult reading,” Elvia responded, “but I don’t always read the book. I do showcase new books to try to catch students’ interest and try to get the kids to read more.” Robynne was about to speak when Mr. Rosenthal, the school principal, walked into the library.

“Just the ladies I want to talk to,” Mike Rosenthal flashed a smile. “I know you have seen the reading scores and I wanted to see what you were thinking about them.”

Both Robynne and Elvia began to speak and Robynne turned and said “You go ahead, Elvia, you already have one idea that is workable.”

Elvia took a deep breath and began again, “I was thinking of starting a lunch time book club. Students could talk about books and give a review of sorts so others could decide if they want to try them. I know it won’t be popular with all students but even if it is only a few it would encourage them to read.”

Mike thought about it for a few minutes of painful silence, “I don’t see anything wrong with trying it, if you are willing to devote the time and energy. Who knows? It might become the ‘in’ thing to do.” Elvia and Robynne could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he continued, “I think kids have to do more out of class reading if

we want their reading scores to improve. Some of the principals were talking about the scores and the suggestion came up that we go back to having a free reading period for fifteen minutes a day.”

“What do you mean by free reading, Mike?” asked Robynne. “I know that when we tried it before the students always had their books at home or someplace, but never with them.” Mike Rosenthal was ready for this criticism. He went on slowly but confidently, “I think that many students would read magazines and newspapers if they were available to them. I don’t see this as more class work. I see this as an enrichment activity.” answered Mr. Rosenthal. “You could have *Sports Illustrated* and other magazines and newspapers available in the classroom for those who didn’t have a book. I really see this as a way to have students engage in reading for relaxation. Let’s bring it up at staff meeting and suggest we try it for the rest of the year.” Mike had a pained look as he turned to Elvia. “The funding for the library will be cut next year by some amount. Exactly how much, I don’t know, but I do know that we are concerned that students have all the books they need. I believe that funding subscriptions for the popular periodicals, you know like *Car and Driver*, *Sports Illustrated*, *National Geographic* and others, will probably be a problem. I will speak to Ms. Garcia, the PTC president, to see if they will agree to help subsidize some of the periodicals for the next year. If we can show that the free reading time helps improve student performance, we will have an argument for keeping the magazines on the budget. We’ll see what happens. I must warn you that the district is also looking hard at cutting some of the tests that are not required by the state, like Gates-MacGinitie. They are very expensive and we should be able to get the results through required testing. The drawback is timing, but we will have to work around it if it becomes necessary.”

Elvia and Robynne understood the gravity of the situation. They gave Mike a tentative promise of support for the free reading time in the hope that other teachers would join them in a new school wide venture.

Teachers began to file in for the staff meeting.

Discussion:

- 1) How can we fund assessments, reading specialists, and proper materials to work with students who are reading below grade level?
- 2) How can teachers and librarians become more familiar with young adult literature to encourage reluctant readers?
- 3) During times of deep budget cuts, what could and should be acquired by a school library that might encourage students to read for pleasure and thereby help create life long learners?
- 4) How do we start setting up a forum, like a book club, that allows students to share their personal reading experiences as consumers of literature?

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