

INCREASE READING VOLUME



Practical Strategies

That Boost Students' Achievement and Passion for Reading

Laura Robb

Foreword by Jim Burke



Increase Reading Volume

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*Practical Strategies That Boost
Students' Achievement and
Passion for Reading*

Laura Robb



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With love for my grandson, Lucas, who loves to read and has a rich, personal reading life. Through our conversations about books, you have opened my mind to new topics and genres and increased my curiosity—and for that, I am eternally grateful!

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Foreword

JIM BURKE, *Middle College High School, San Mateo, CA*

Author of The English Teacher's Companion and editor of Uncharted Territory, 2nd ed.

Last year, I decided to subscribe to MasterClass, the series of high-quality seminars featuring the Great Ones who have distinguished themselves as chefs, designers, writers, leaders, and much more. Imagine the pleasure and practical value of listening to a series of short talks by Malcolm Gladwell about how to write great nonfiction or Salman Rushdie on how stories work. Imagine the insights and intelligence about diplomacy that the MasterClass taught by Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice offers to those who make a little time each day to sit down, listen to, and learn from such masters of their craft.

This is what it was like for me to read this book by Laura Robb.

Over the course of my teaching career, few things have been as steady as the challenge to help my high school students become confident, willing, independent readers who can find their own books (or other texts) and maintain the attentional stamina and engagement needed to enjoy reading or, when necessary, persevere through those texts that may not be fun but are important to be able to make sense of within the larger context of their learning.

To these challenges, which are certainly enough on their own, we would have to add the challenge of helping students develop and maintain an identity of themselves *as* readers, as the sort of people who can and *do* read for a range of purposes, including for pleasure. These challenges have been real and persistent whether I was teaching freshman “remedial English,” as it was called when I first began teaching over thirty years ago, seniors in AP English literature, or my current students at Middle College High School, located on a two-year college campus where they are in my high school English class for one hour before running across campus to attend a college philosophy, biology, or psychology class where the volume and complexity of the reading demands are intense.

As I read Laura’s book, I felt like she was responding in 2022, guided by her vast experience, wisdom, and the latest research, to questions I have grappled

with since I began teaching in 1989. For while I may have made progress when it comes to teaching and engaging my students as readers, the truth is that we are competing in what some describe as an “attention economy,” that attention being a very limited resource for which the competition is fierce.

Throughout this book you are holding, we learn a remarkable number and range of strategies to help secondary students improve their stamina and become more engaged, independent readers, thanks to Laura’s many suggestions in these areas. What stays with me after reading this book, however, is that you cannot turn a page without learning what it means to be a fully engaged teacher of reading, for on each page you learn not only what Laura does to engage readers or teach students how to find books they will want to read, but you learn *how* she does it, how she *thinks* about such interactions between students and their teachers, between students and each other, between readers and the texts they read. It is in these ways that this book is a MasterClass with one of the most thoughtful, passionate, and dedicated teacher-leaders in our profession. As a teacher of reading (and how to write about and discuss it in class or individual conferences), Laura Robb embodies Henry James’s admonition that we should strive to be “one on whom nothing is lost” when it comes to reading and how to teach it.

This is a book that is not only filled with what Laura has learned throughout her long and distinguished career but is packed with all that the changes in our society and schools have forced us to learn to do and consider if our classes are to be culturally responsive, equitable, and engaging to everyone. We all know that we should be having students write about and discuss different types of texts, but most of us struggle to know what that looks like and how to implement such practices in ways that make the intended difference. In this brief but substantive book, Laura Robb, as her work has done for years, reminds us that to be a teacher of reading, to instill in our students a love of reading, to cultivate an environment that embraces literacy in our classrooms, cannot happen in isolation nor by accident. It requires intentionality and the support of administrators and other leaders, for as Laura writes here, “positive changes are more likely to occur in a school where the principal and other administrators continually build trusting relationships among staff, encourage teacher leadership and feedback, and set aside time to have ongoing conversations” about literacy in general as the connection to privilege, racism, and deficit models (19).

Fundamental to this mission of individual and institutional change in literacy is Laura’s own example, both to us and to her students, of how reading shapes both her personal *and* professional life. This connection and commitment is evident when she writes:

Yes, it's important to read and know the literature that relates to the content you teach; that's a given. But it's also important for you to carve out time to develop your own reading life, for doing this enables you to talk to students about recent books you enjoyed. It also enlarges your understanding of the value of volume in reading: building vocabulary, improving recall and comprehension, and developing a clearer understanding of a specific text structure. The more you connect to yourself as a reader, the better able you are to make connections with and for students. For example, when [one of my students] Oscar told me during a conference, "When I read on my own, I like graphic novels; I can stick with it and get into the story."

I was able to reply, "You know, I like to read magazines and mysteries on my own because even if I'm tired, I can read them. It's okay to read books that are pure fun."

Oscar looked befuddled at first, and then said, "Yeah. I'm... I'm reading..."

"That's what counts," I told him.

And Oscar grinned.

A personal reading life enables you to experience the power of visualizing as a path to understanding, the need to talk to someone about a book resonating with you, and that sometimes, reading can be challenging work. Your enthusiasm for and engagement in reading can rub off on students as they choose books they want to and can read, ensuring they will be engaged. (13–14)

Though this book is short, it is built on a solid foundation of established and current research, combined with Laura's own experiences in the classroom, where she continues to work with kids of all backgrounds and grade levels.

Returning to the MasterClass series of seminars I mentioned at the beginning, I appreciate the way I can choose to read and use this gem of a book to help me think about what to teach with a particular text, how to teach it, how I might have students write about, discuss, or respond to it, and how I might go about assessing their understanding throughout the reading of that text. As with those MasterClass seminars, I can jump in and listen to Malcolm Gladwell talk for fifteen fascinating minutes about just the importance of titles, or I can settle in and let Malcolm tell me in much greater detail about how he thinks and works as a master craftsman of nonfiction. So it is here with Laura Robb: I can dip in for ten or fifteen minutes for a MasterClass-like seminar about using class discussion to improve engagement, or I can settle in and read a whole chapter about how to pair core texts and more contemporary, culturally relevant titles.

As she does with her own students, regardless of what she is teaching, Laura Robb is going to always make us feel that we can do for ourselves what she is here to help us do for all of our students:

Every student in your class deserves to improve their reading expertise and develop a personal reading life. This will most likely occur when you increase students' volume in reading, discussions about books, and writing about reading in notebooks. In addition, during frequent conferences, encourage reflection on their reading progress and how books have changed their thinking. With your support and understanding of students' needs, reading can become a positive, lifelong experience that enables students to be analytical, think critically, problem solve, and best of all, read to learn and for pleasure! (123)

Preface

My Reading Teacher Life Turns Upside Down

“I hate reading.”

“You’ll never make me like reading.”

“Boring!”

“[Reading] makes me sleepy.”

“Books are just words. Lots of ‘em.”

These comments are from middle grade and middle school students reading three or more years below grade level, responding to the question I ask each one during a conference: *How do you feel about reading?* Like me, at first, you might bristle when you hear their words because you and I always hope that students will love reading. Moreover, these responses can increase personal anxieties and feelings of being unprepared to meet such teaching challenges. Despite our best efforts, many children in our care don’t feel a connection to books, and for those children, reading is hard work that makes them tired—it’s work they try to avoid.

While anxiety and frustration are understandable in a listener, it’s important to move beyond both and credit students with being honest, even if that honesty reveals their own anger and frustration. Whether in elementary, middle, or high school, students frequently have difficulty finding the words to ask, *Can you help me be a better reader?* But that’s the message these developing readers—students reading three or more years below grade level—are telegraphing when they use *hate* and *boring* to describe their feelings toward reading.

How can we best serve these students?

This question continually replayed in my mind and the minds of the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers who I coach in Winchester, Virginia. As we searched for answers, one thought from my past experiences continually pummeled my mind: choosing to read books at school and at home increases volume in reading—and research shows a strong correlation between reading volume and stu-

dents' growth as readers (Allington and McGill-Franzen 2021). Daily reading at school not only increases volume, but it also provides the practice these students need to improve comprehension and develop a personal reading life. However, progress is not as simple as finding time for developing readers to read every day, and so my teaching life turned upside down. To learn more about these developing readers, teachers and I held frequent short conferences.

Conferring pointed out that these students carried emotional baggage. For example, during past experiences with round-robin reading, some of their peers snickered when these students stumbled over words they couldn't decode, causing them to retreat into a silent, cooperative stance, hoping no one would call on them. Reviewing three consecutive years of state testing in reading and vocabulary revealed a steady decline in their scores. Not surprising—they weren't reading, and many had difficulty decoding. The teachers and I agreed that before inviting students to choose books they could read and find a comfortable place to read them, we had to help students feel safe by:

- Honoring their language and encouraging translanguaging during discussions and when they wrote about reading in their notebooks.
- Explaining that drawing was writing and that they could use pictures in their responses to reading.
- Assuring them repeatedly that they would *not* be asked to read aloud during class and making good on this promise.
- Showing them that reading “easy” books was okay and explaining that as they read and practiced reading, they would improve.
- Modeling again and again how to choose a “good fit” book.
- Listening to their fears and hopes about reading during conferences and, with their help, finding ways to support them.
- Integrating word sorting and word study into lessons to improve decoding skills and develop their knowledge of phonics and how our language works.

Progress among students didn't occur quickly. The poet Eve Merriam said, “It takes a lot of slow to grow,” and we learned that it wasn't possible to rush children forward. Teachers and I followed students' lead and had daily conversations that became reminders of the importance to teach the children in front of us instead of covering curriculum.

An Asset Model

An asset model focuses on what students can do. When you base instructional decisions on students' strengths, interests, and desires to learn, and you also show students that you value their assets and potential and are willing to build trusting relationships with them, then it's possible to help students become readers. To support students' reading progress, teachers and I identified six areas that continually require attention whether they are developing, proficient, or advanced readers.

Use time strategically. If you're having difficulty including independent reading of self-selected books at the end of class, move it to the first thing your students do. Whether you have forty or sixty minutes for reading, make independent and instructional reading priorities. With forty to forty-five-minute periods, plan over two weeks: three days for reading and two for writing the first week and three days for writing and two for reading the second week.

Increase reading volume. When students read self-selected books daily, they develop the habit of independent reading and soon choose to read at home for pleasure. Increased volume enlarges students' vocabularies and can create lifelong readers who turn to books to learn and to enjoy.

Build students' vocabulary and background knowledge through daily teacher read-alouds and short videos that increase students' background knowledge of genres and topics, enabling them to connect to books on diverse topics.

Practice decoding words, developing fluency, and studying word families and completing word sorts; they all contribute to students' abilities to read expressively and with understanding. Students can complete word sorts, build word families, and for increasing fluency, practice reading and rereading poems that they volunteer to perform.

Improve comprehension. This occurs when students choose and can read texts to discuss with partners and in small groups as well as when they respond to open-ended questions that have more than one answer and can support their answers with text evidence. These conversations combined with writing about reading also develop students' critical thinking and ability to connect ideas.

Using formative assessments includes careful teacher observations of students as they work and conferring with students to discuss texts and explore their evolving reading attitudes. In addition, the writing about reading that students complete in their notebooks can reveal their level of comprehension and ability to use vocabulary related to a text and unit.

In *Increase Reading Volume*, I'm not offering scripts and recipes; I already know—and research corroborates this statement—that you, the teacher, are the

key to your students' learning and progress. I know that you can and will adapt and adjust the ideas in this book to what *your students* show you they need. Though you and I may live far apart, this book allows us to work together with the goal of developing all students' personal reading lives.

My experiences learning with developing readers imprinted this thought in my mind: *Volume in reading matters to the reading growth and pleasure in reading of developing, proficient, and advanced readers!* I look forward to doing this work with you and your colleagues in the pages that follow.

Acknowledgments

First, I'd like to thank Robb Clouse, who encouraged me to write this book for NCTE, and Kurt Austin, for ushering the book through the process of peer review and editing. It is a topic that Richard Allington, Stephen Krashen, Mary Howard, and I have championed. And to my students, those who hated reading and those who embraced reading: you led me to reflect on ways to increase reading volume in middle school and high school—and I thank you for your suggestions and honesty! You also validated my belief that having choices, reflecting on, discussing, and writing about reading can develop a deeper understanding of texts and enhance readers' ability to think critically and to connect and evaluate ideas.

Deep thanks to my son Evan Robb, principal of Johnson Williams Middle School, for reading early and revised drafts of the book. You always offered helpful feedback that led me to rethink ideas and revise content. Thanks, too, for the wonderful essay you wrote from the principal's perspective and for the tips it includes. Thanks to Bridget Wilson and Wanda Waters for their work using instructional genre-based reading units, giving students choices, and providing me with excellent feedback. Finally, to all the teachers I've coached and learned with, my sincere thanks! You have embraced volume in reading and understand the value of students' self-selecting books for independent and instructional reading. You are the change makers who recognize that for students to become readers, they need access to the finest, culturally relevant books!

Note: All names of teachers and students are pseudonyms with the exception of Bridget Wilson, Wanda Waters, and Evan Robb.

Engagement Leads to Volume in Reading

“**W**hat kind of teaching is this, anyway?” and “You’re weird, lady. What’re we gonna learn from you reading to us? This is dumb!” These comments made by seventh and eighth graders as they rushed out of my first class with them were not exactly what I had hoped for. The sixteen students had been handpicked by teachers to work with me every day for forty-five minutes. Teachers believed these students should be succeeding in English class, but after years of not reading at school and/or at home, they lacked stamina, a rich reading vocabulary, and background knowledge. Skill and drill worksheets and reading cards with short text and five multiple-choice questions were the backbone of their “remedial” program. It wasn’t working. The principal and the superintendent wanted change.

Though it was several years ago, I still recall sitting opposite Mary Ann Biggs, principal of Johnson Williams Middle School in Berryville, Virginia, and Dennis Kellison, superintendent of Clarke County Schools. Both wanted to know if they hired me, what type of reading curriculum I would offer these students. I outlined a curriculum based on *The Meaning Makers* by Gordon Wells (1985). Wells conducted extensive research and showed that stories and storying are central to all learning. In fact, stories have a role in education far beyond the acquisition of literacy, and storying—the telling of stories we tell ourselves to connect past experiences to new knowledge—is the way human beings learn across disciplines. I proposed a reading workshop that included daily teacher read-alouds, responding to my read-alouds through discussion and shared writing, and independent reading of self-selected books. We agreed there would be no grades or tests because the primary goal was to bring students into the reading life. Two weeks before school started, Mrs. Biggs sent a letter home to parents, explaining the goals of this extra reading class.

During the first six classes, I read short stories, ones I considered action packed and filled with suspense. Frontloading activities were unsuccessful; no one participated. The suspense and tension of “The Elevator” by William Sleator (1989) did not appear to interest the students. My eyes scanned the group as

I read. Billy's head was on his desk, his eyes closed. Four students were drawing in notebooks. The rest slumped in their chairs, disinterested, disconnected, and disengaged.

The first story that caught students' attention was *Captain Murderer* by Charles Dickens, as retold by George Harland. The bloodthirsty, cannibalistic captain, who murdered his beautiful young brides on their wedding night and then baked them in a pie crust before eating this hearty dinner, had them at the edge of their seats. "Read it again," said three different voices. And as I began the story again, I rejoiced inwardly at these reactions.

The next class included a discussion of *Captain Murderer*. "Gruesome, gory, great" were some initial comments I recorded on chart paper. "He eats humans. Isn't there a word for that?" asked Richard.

I printed *cannibalism* on the chart and Jack added, "Yeah. That's the word."

Then I asked the class, "How do you feel about the last bride sacrificing herself to destroy the captain?" Silence. "Turn-and talk, and then you can share." Silence.

Then Chip blurted out, "That lady was dumb to give up her life."

"Yeah," said Jack. "She coulda thought of something else."

"But she didn't," said Casey. "Sometimes you gotta help others."

The discussion continued until the bell rang, and the class filed out, some students still arguing about the bride's decision. This was the first real discussion among them, the first time I observed them involved with a story and sharing how they felt and thought.

Armed with a small success, I decided to read aloud *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (by Katherine Paterson) next, as I believed that Gilly's anger and dysfunction would resonate with these students. I reserved the remaining thirty minutes of class time for independent reading of self-selected books. During short conferences when I asked each student, "How can you become a better reader?" ten answered, "By reading—I guess." The rest told me, "That's your job."

Up to this point, not one student had noticed the shelves at the back of the room filled with hundreds of books or wondered why the books were there. I forced myself to have no expectations when I introduced the classroom library and modeled how to choose a book. Choice did not immediately motivate students to read; however, after several weeks of modeling how to choose a book, most were able to find a "good fit" book and a comfortable place to read. The day Richard and Keysha objected to the bell ringing, marking the end of independent reading, was a milestone moment. One-on-one conferences also revealed students' change of heart toward reading, and many asked me to add more adventure and fantasy books to their classroom library. And I did, believ-

ing that to make the library theirs, students needed to have input on new additions, so the library included books they desired to read.

Why I Shared This Literacy Snapshot

Throughout my teaching life, my students have been my teachers. Sure, I learn from reading professional books and articles, visiting classrooms, attending conferences, and having conversations with colleagues. However, when I step into the classroom, I learn from students how I might support them and not judge their feelings about reading. I learn to be patient and to say nothing negative when I offer them two to three books to browse through, and they return them to a shelf. I learn how important choice is and that abandoning a book is okay, as I don't want them to read a book that doesn't engage and interest them. I learn to notice every millimeter of progress each one makes and to share it during a conference or as I high-five students exiting the class. Wanting them to experience the joys of reading is important to me, but I quickly understand that it's best to put my agenda in the deep freeze and let them find their own way into reading. And this happens at different points during the year.

By spring, most students increased their stamina and could read for twenty to thirty minutes during independent reading. When two students ask to check out a book and take it home, I notice that each day, a few more ask. Having a rich, diverse classroom library and time to read at school shows students how much I value reading. Moreover, reading self-selected books at school every day develops a pleasurable habit that students frequently transfer to at-home reading. I watch with delight their reading odometers collect reading mileage.

Volume in reading and time to read books relevant to their lives and the world improves their vocabulary and enlarges their background knowledge. A culturally relevant classroom library offers easy access to books, and time to settle down and read every day increases the amount of books students complete. Setting aside time for pairs of students and small groups to discuss books they enjoy and those they abandon offers students possible books to investigate and maybe read. Over time, resisting reading and "I hate reading" comments can diminish. Though elementary school teachers have the time in their schedules for students to read for pleasure, most middle and high school teachers don't. Research reveals that by middle school, the amount of time students read independently at school decreases and remains on this trajectory through high school (Scholastic 2019).

Studies Show Our Students Aren't Reading Enough

Scholastic continues to conduct studies of the amount of reading students do at school and at home. Their results correlate with the flat trend in reading scores on our nation's report card, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), from 2009–2019.

- Daily in-school independent reading occurs for 17 percent of students ages six to seventeen (Scholastic 2015).
- By age nine, reading volume starts to drop: 35 percent of nine-year-old children report reading five to seven days a week compared to 57 percent of eight-year-old children (Scholastic 2019).
- Since 2009, there has been a steady decline of children reading nearly every day, and a rise in those reading less than one day a week (Scholastic 2019).
- Survey findings based on nearly 3,700 preK–12 teachers and principals show that 94 percent of principals and teachers agree or strongly agree that students should choose books at school and read independently every day, but only 36 percent made time for daily independent reading (Scholastic 2017).

This continual drop in time students read independently at school can have a negative effect on children's literacy development and ultimately result in disengagement with reading due to a lack of daily practice (Allington 1977, 2011, 2013; Goldberg and Houser 2020; Miller and Sharp 2018; Robb and Robb 2020). Access to books and time to read at school every day that classes meet can foster engagement with reading, increase volume in reading, and can lead to developing a lifelong personal reading journey.

The Seven Pillars of Engagement

These seven pillars work together much like an orchestra does to create the engagement students need in order to read widely and frequently. If the pillars are in place in a school, it reveals that teachers have cultivated the seven because teachers respect students' stories and cultures and strive to be responsive to each reader's unique needs.

1. **Choice** empowers students to decide which books they want to read or whether to abandon a book and search for a different one. Students' choices

develop literary tastes as students discover the authors and genres they enjoy, invest in their reading, and advertise books they love by sharing them with peers. Students become engaged readers when they can choose books to read, set how much time they'll invest in reading, and develop responsibility as they read to meet personal goals and teachers' expectations.

2. Agency is an outgrowth of choice, freedom, self-regulated learning, and making decisions. When students take an active role in their education and have autonomy, they can set deadline dates to complete tasks, create learning goals, decide on actions they'll take to reach specific goals, self-evaluate outcomes, and become engaged learners. Ownership is key to agency and often leads to a growth mindset, the belief that with hard work and teacher support, students begin to view mistakes as positive information to learn from and use to move forward (Dweck 2007).

3. Relationships between teacher and student in school or during virtual learning can lead to positive interactions and create a thriving community of engaged learners. Teachers who invest in relationship building throughout the school year ensure that every student feels valued, heard, and respected. To form relationships, be a good listener, take the time to get to know every student as a unique person, honor and enjoy their stories, and share some of yours. Always be approachable, show you care by responding to needs, questions, worries, and joyful moments. When students have positive relationships with teachers and other adults in their schools, they feel part of the community and start to invest in their learning.

4. Trust is an important component of building a community of engaged learners and benefits principals, teachers, and students. As principals and teachers collaborate to develop relational trust, improve instruction, and cultivate culturally relevant teaching, students come to trust their teachers and peers and feel confident that both groups will keep them physically and emotionally safe.

5. Sanctuary is a safe place. When students learn in schools that are sanctuaries, teachers help them understand that mistakes and failures are part of the learning process. In classrooms that are sanctuaries, students feel valued and have a respect for one another that fosters inclusion over exclusion and tak-

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culturally relevant teaching asks teachers to view students' native language, history, and families as valuable assets. Teachers can foster engagement by encouraging students to leverage their cultural capital and use their knowledge and unique experiences to support how they learn. This can include translanguaging, inviting students to integrate their primary language into their speaking and writing, and asking parents to provide feedback about how their child learns and what kinds of support might benefit their child (España and Herrera 2020; Osorio 2020). In addition, choosing culturally and linguistically sustaining books for teaching counterstories (to white-privileged texts) can deepen students' understanding of social justice in the context of historically accurate texts (Muhammad 2020).

ing risks over compliance. Engagement in learning can flourish when students feel safe and the class community respects their choices, feelings, and thinking.

6. Honest Communication between students and their teacher during conferring, in informal conversations, and in written notes can occur as soon as students feel safe and have a trusting relationship with teachers. When students share their feelings, explanations for behaviors and attitudes, hopes, and dreams, teachers can offer the emotional and academic support that can lead to engagement with reading and learning.

7. Reflection asks students to look back and think about their reading and learning to gain insights about their process that can help them move forward. By cultivating self-awareness, students take responsibility for their learning and explore ways they can grow and improve as critical thinkers. When teachers discuss the benefits of reflection and reserve time for students to revisit reading conversations, choices, and writing about reading, engagement and motivation can increase.

In classrooms where the seven pillars of engagement thrive, the pillars work together and nurture the engagement in reading that students need in order to grow their reading identities and at the same time strengthen their skill through volume in reading.

Engagement Increases Volume in Reading

In 2008, William Brozo, Gerry Shiel, and Keith Topping wrote “Engagement in Reading: Lessons Learned from Three PISA Countries.” Using PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) results of the fifteen-year-old students who took the reading test in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland, the authors published their findings in ILA’s *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.

PISA defines literacy as “the capacity of students to apply knowledge and skills and to analyze, reason, and communicate effectively as they pose, solve, and interpret problems in a variety of situations” (305). The PISA test’s variable that received the most scrutiny was reading engagement. The authors identified three areas that combined to create engagement in reading and resulted in students reading and enjoying a variety of texts for long periods of time:

- **Diversity of Reading:** Students who often read six types of texts—magazines, comics, fiction books, nonfiction books, email, and webpages.
- **Frequency of Leisure (Independent) Reading:** The amount of time students read self-selected books every day on their own.

- **Attitudes toward Reading:** The reasons why students read are important and statements such as *It's what I love to do; I can get lost in a book and forget the passing of time, etc.*, reveal a positive and enthusiastic outlook.

When these three areas work in concert, students continually experience engaged reading and increase their volume. Adolescents engaged in their reading also scored higher on the NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress), the nation's report card, and state reading tests. Engaged readers also had better grades in high school than those who were less engaged with reading. In her book *Engaging Children: Igniting a Drive for Deeper Learning K–8*, Ellin Keene shares a chart of visible and invisible conditions in classrooms that lead to student engagement (2018). To encourage reading, Keene notes:

Teachers encourage children to choose most books and topics for writing and inquiry themselves and make it possible for them to pursue topics of passionate interest—they have equal access to all materials, not just those at their “level.” (38)

Keene's respect for learners and her faith in their ability to make choices that work, as well as having the freedom to read without being boxed into “levels,” allows students to pursue their passions and set challenging goals. Take seventh grader Helena, who in the primary grades struggled with learning to read but by seventh grade is reading and enjoying books like *The Giver* and *A Long Walk to Water*. One day, she arrives at school with a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Her teacher tells Helena that she will read it in ninth grade and that she might find the book a challenge. Helena's reply is what I hope all students have the confidence to say: “I've heard from my brother and his friends that it's a great book, so I'll read it now and then read it again in ninth grade.”

After rereading parts of the introduction to understand it, Helena read the book and loved it. Sure, she reread parts to “get it.” But her desire and passion demonstrate it's possible to push “levels” aside when students have the desire to read long books and willingly reread parts. Reading long books develops students' ability to hold information they learn in early chapters in their memory and then use those details later on in the text when they need to understand an event, decision, conflict, or problem.

When you know students' level of background knowledge on a topic, their reading habits, and the amount of independent reading they're doing, honor their grit and desire by encouraging them to “give a challenging book a go.” Check in frequently with the student. Listen. Support. And if the student chooses to stop reading the book, help make that a positive decision.

Volume in Reading Matters

Volume in reading depends on the amount of time students spend reading at school each day and the number of books completed. Amount of books can be tricky because the length of a book is also important. So, if the established number of independent reading books students must read each year is thirty-five to forty-five, it's important to pause and consider what these numbers mean. A seventh grader reads the *Encyclopedia Brown* series, which averages about 100 pages per book, while a student in the same class reads *The Hunger Games* series, which

For students to improve their reading skill, they have to do the reading.

have about 400 pages per book. Students reading longer and more complex books might not reach the required number of books a teacher or school has established. Perhaps it's better to be flexible and accept fewer books from students reading and enjoying longer texts and look at volume in reading

from a different angle: the amount of time students read each day.

When you or your students ask, *Why can't I skip twenty minutes of independent reading homework today or for several days?*, the research of Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) tells the story. Their study found a correlation between the time students devote to daily reading and their reading proficiency and comprehension scores.

In sum, the principal conclusion of this study is that the amount of time a child spends reading books is related to the child's reading level in the fifth grade and growth in reading proficiency from second to fifth grade. The case can be made that reading books is a cause, not merely a reflection, of reading proficiency. (302)

However, The National Reading Panel rejected the findings of the 1988 study, on the grounds that it does not meet their scientific research standards. The good news is that in 2004, Dr. S. Jay Samuels and Dr. Yi-Chen Wu completed a scientific study in response to the National Reading Panel and concluded that the more time students read, the higher their achievement compared to a control group. Samuels' and Wu's scientific research corroborated the conclusions of Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding.

Nancie Atwell also links daily reading to developing proficiency in reading books every day (2014). Volume in reading is an effective intervention for developing readers (Allington 1977, 2011; Allington and Gabriel, 2012; Allington and McGill-Franzen 2021) and a predictor of learning success because students who read perform better on standardized tests in reading, vocabulary, and writing than do students who read little to no books (Krashen 2004).

TABLE 1.1. Variation in Amount of Independent Reading. From Anderson, Richard C., et al. "Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School." *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1988, pp. 285–303.

Percentile Rank for Reading Volume	Minutes a Day	Words a Year
98th	67.3	4,733,000
90th	33.4	2,375,000
70th	16.9	1,168,000
50th	9.2	601,000
30th	4.3	251,000
10th	1.0	51,000
2nd	0.0	_____

Richard Allington recommends that children read in all subjects throughout the school day to maintain volume in reading (2013). To reach this goal, schools can support volume in reading for students in seven ways:

1. Classroom Libraries. Bridget Wilson, a fifth-grade ELA inclusion teacher, describes the benefits of a classroom library: "Having a classroom library ensures our ability to check off many of the things we all consider essential for our students. As teachers, we can feel good knowing that a great classroom library can increase the quality of student discussion, encourage choice, inform, motivate, and excite students at any level. A varied and rich class library will provide our students opportunities for acceptance, inclusion, and informed citizenry. Having a vast and inclusive collection of books at our students' fingertips will not only help them check out stacks of books to read, but as their reading increases so will their skill and critical thinking."

As you develop your classroom library, it's important to have books by Black, Latinx, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Muslim Americans—in other words, books need to represent the cultural diversity of our country. Besides fiction and poetry, ELA and content teachers need to choose nonfiction books that show students the achievements of diverse cultures and include books about scientists, mathematicians, doctors, lawyers, scholars, political activists, dancers, musicians, artists, actors, journalists, and sports greats. White students and students of color need to understand that the contributions to our society and the world represent the diversity that defines our nation!

A solid classroom starter library has about 600 books. However, you should strive to have 1,000 to 1,500 books in your classroom library if you teach English. If you teach science, social studies, math, physical education, or the fine arts, aim for 200–250 books in classroom libraries. Books in content subjects move students beyond the limits of textbook learning and can increase their depth

of knowledge of a topic. Sports teachers in several schools I've worked with have collaborated with English teachers to have a "sports and health section" in classroom libraries.

Invite students to spread the word about beloved books and reserve time in your class to present a sixty-second elevator talk and advertise to peers a book they enjoyed.

Sixty-Second Elevator Talk

Here are some tips for presenting a brief talk that captures listeners' interest.

Jot notes that:

- Recap an exciting part.
- Explain why the book's a great read.
- End with an intriguing question, a unique idea from the book, or an inspirational quote from the book.

Unfortunately, there are some schools where the media specialists and other staff believe classroom libraries compete with the school's media center. Not so. School media centers have much larger collections than classroom libraries and a specialist who knows all the books. In most schools, students visit the media center once a week to check out books, and this doesn't offer them the daily access to replace books they've completed that a classroom library does. You can avoid limiting students' access to books by having the media specialist work closely with teachers to form trusting

relationships that result in supporting one another.

2. Independent Reading of Self-Selected Books. Often, because teachers leave independent reading as the last experience students have in English classes, it doesn't happen. However, if daily independent reading is the practice students need to develop their reading skill and stamina, then it's crucial that teachers in grades 5 through 12 intentionally set aside time at the start of class for students to self-select books and read. In October 2019, NCTE posted a position statement on independent reading that opens with:

Independent reading leads to an increased reading volume of reading. The more one reads, the better one reads. The more one reads, the more knowledge of words and language one acquires. The more one reads, the more fluent one becomes as a reader. The more one reads, the easier it becomes to sustain the mental effort necessary to comprehend complex texts. The more one reads, the more one learns about the people and happenings of our world. This increased volume of reading is essential. (Allington 2014)

Daily independent reading also develops stamina, the ability of students to focus on reading as well as recall and understand what they've read for at least thirty minutes. Equally important, books offer students mirrors of their own life experiences and windows into the lives of others (Bishop 1990). As students choose books and read, they can experience life in the past, present, and future.

They also can develop an awareness of how others live and interact as well as explore topics that broaden their knowledge of the world beyond their school and community. When schools invest in classroom libraries in all subjects, they create access to books for students throughout the school day.

3. Instructional Reading. One novel or one grade-level program for all students diminishes students' reading volume because if a group of students can't read the materials, they're sliding backward, avoiding reading, and developing negative attitudes. You can organize instructional reading around a genre, a theme, a genre and a theme, or a core book and contemporary related books and have multiple texts for students so they read at their instructional reading levels (see chapters five and six).

4. Alternate Texts in Science and Social Studies. Now students read in ELA class and the media center, but as they move through other content subjects, reading stops for below grade-level readers because textbooks are too difficult. Volume in reading matters for all students, but it especially matters for learners who read below grade level. To help developing readers make progress, they need to read more than students reading at or above grade level (Allington 1977, 2007, 2011). That's why reading in one class a day is not enough volume to raise students' reading skills. In his article "Intervention All Day Long: New Hope for Struggling Readers" (2007), Richard Allington writes:

We need to reconceptualize intervention for struggling readers as something that must occur all day long. Intervention cannot just consist of those few minutes working with a reading specialist. Let's face the fact that too often, the texts in students' hands are appropriate for the highest achieving half of students, ensuring that the rich get richer because only the best readers have books in their hands that they can read fluently, and with understanding. All students need texts of an appropriate level of complexity all day long to thrive in school. (13)

Moreover, students who can't complete the reading also can't participate in discussions and be productive members of collaborative learning. With the assistance of the media specialist, content teachers can order books on the topics they teach that developing readers can learn from. Now students can read in every class, and each day, volume increases their reading competency.

5. School Media Centers. Truly the heart and hub of a school, today's media centers are much more than a place to check out books. They tap into students' creative thinking and problem-solving abilities with makerspaces, comfortable spaces to read, and collaborative spaces where students can discuss books and plan projects. The media specialist can support research projects by finding

materials for students that teachers can check out and bring to their classrooms. Besides book talks about new books with students, the media specialist often publishes a bimonthly list of new books for staff and highlights a few in book talks at faculty and department meetings.

In schools where classroom teachers and the media specialist are a team, teachers seek input on books that might interest specific students and suggestions for culturally relevant texts, popular authors, and series to include in classroom libraries. Being a team ensures you're working for the same goals: including books that represent the diverse populations in our country and increasing every student's volume in reading.


6. Readers' Notebooks. Students have notebooks for responding to their reading, to teacher read-alouds, and to videos, book trailers, and photographs (Crowder 2020). I recommend readers' notebooks remain at school stored in a plastic crate, cardboard box, or on a bookshelf that's labeled with the class section or period in which it meets. Before class officially starts, have three to four students quickly give out notebooks. At the end of class, the same students return notebooks to the appropriate place. Avoid sending notebooks home, as you'll find that many don't come back the next day, and that's frustrating. Moreover, some don't appear for several days. Instead, have students complete writing about reading homework on separate paper. After you read their work and provide feedback, have students paste each homework entry into their notebooks.

For writing about reading to encourage volume in reading, students need to share and discuss notebook entries. It's during the sharing and talking that students learn about books peers couldn't put down. In middle and high school, students value peer recommendations for reading far more than books adults promote. When eighth grader Ariel listened to Masha read her notebook entry

on *The Fog of Forgetting* by G. A. Morgan, Ariel, a devotee of horse stories, checked out the book when Masha completed it. In a conference, Ariel told me that because Masha was so excited about the book and couldn't wait to start *The Kinfolk*, the next in the series, Ariel decided to give the fantasy novel a try.

Vary how students exchange notebook entries about books by inviting them to share with different partners or in a small group. Then, periodically, reserve time for students to read these comments.

7. Daily Teacher Read-Alouds. By reserving time to read aloud every day, you have dozens of opportunities to share poems, short stories, short biographies, myths, folktales, articles, and excerpts from texts as well as introduce stu-



You can also create a bulletin board for students to write on sticky notes the title and author of a book and one sentence explaining why they enjoyed reading it.

dents to a variety of genres and authors. Read aloud short and long texts that represent the diversity in our country and introduce students to authors such as Nikki Grimes, Janet Wong, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nic Stone, Lamar Giles, Ibi Zoboi, Yusef Saalam, Elizabeth Acevedo, Julian Randall, Yesenia Montilla, Angie Thomas, Nicola Yoon, Sabaa Tahir, Jason Reynolds, as well as Marie Lu, Celia C. Pérez, Aisha Saeed, Joseph Bruchac, Samira Ahmed, Julia Alvarez, and Pablo Cartaya, to name a few. You'll also telegraph the message that these authors are important to you and that students will enjoy reading their books.

I recommend that you make the text available to students after you've completed it. Feature books on the chalkboard tray and on your desk or in a special place if it's a short text you downloaded from the internet. Recently, a seventh-grade teacher I was coaching read a few short stories from *Take the Mic: Fictional Stories of Everyday Resistance* (2019), and ten students wrote their names on the chalkboard under "Read-Alouds I Want to Read." Fortunately, the teacher was able to purchase two additional copies, making access easier.

If you have a short class period, choose a poem, a short article, or a short narrative to read aloud. You are also modeling fluent, expressive reading and selecting a text that encourages students to think and talk about a concept, specific topic, theme, genre, and the beauty of the language. Besides exploring texts for daily read-alouds, I invite you to set aside time to reflect on your own personal reading life.

Teachers Need a Personal Reading Life

Whether you're a scientist reading about climate change to narrow the focus of your hypothesis, a math teacher who knows students need to read well to be able to unpack word problems, or an English teacher having students read science fiction, reading to learn is an important part of your discipline. Yes, it's important to read and to know the literature that relates to the content you teach; that's a given. But it's also important for you to carve out time to develop your own reading life, for doing this enables you to talk to students about recent books you enjoyed. It also enlarges your understanding of the value of volume in reading: building vocabulary, improving recall and comprehension, and developing a clearer understanding of a specific text structure. The more you connect to yourself as a reader, the better you are able to make connections with and for students. For example, when sixth grader Oscar told me during a conference, "When I read on my own, I like graphic novels; I can stick with it and get into the story."

I was able to reply, “You know, I like to read magazines and mysteries on my own because even if I’m tired, I can read them. It’s okay to read books that are pure fun.”

Oscar looked befuddled at first, and then said, “Yeah. I’m. . . I’m reading. . .”
“That’s what counts,” I told him.

And Oscar grinned.

A personal reading life enables you to experience the power of visualizing as a path to understanding, the need to talk to someone about a book resonating with you, and that sometimes, reading can be challenging work. Your enthusiasm for and engagement in reading can rub off on students as they choose books they want to and can read, ensuring they will be engaged.

Nurturing and growing your personal reading life can familiarize you with culturally diverse books and poems to use for daily read-alouds as well as include these texts in your instructional reading units of study and classroom library.

Keeping in Touch with Your Reading Life

When Donald Graves spoke at national conferences, he often encouraged teachers to stay in touch with their own literacy so they could better understand how to support, build, and enhance students’ literate lives. When you experience the need to focus deeply on reading and the pleasures of self-selection, discovering new authors, new topics, and returning to favorite genres, you recognize what good readers do and can share your personal experiences with students.

Closing Reflections: Collaborative Conversations

Meet with a colleague or your grade-level team or department and have conversations about ideas presented in this chapter that can challenge the status quo as well as nudge you to risk changing teaching and learning practices.

- Why is it important to tweak your class schedule so independent reading is front and center?
- Why does culturally relevant teaching affect the books you read aloud, use for instruction, and add to your classroom library? Why is this important for all students?

- Why is volume in reading the key to developing expertise for all readers but especially for developing readers?
- How can the seven pillars of engagement increase students' reading volume?

As You Continue to Read

Explore the next six chapters to see how you can increase students' volume in reading.

Chapter 2 looks at white privilege curricula, suggests how teachers can confront their personal biases, and provides tips for developing units that reflect the diversity in our country. You'll also explore ideas for integrating technology into your lessons.

Chapter 3 takes a deep dive into independent reading and how it enlarges specific reading skills and volume. You'll also explore and reflect on authentic assessments and guidelines for implementing each one.

Chapter 4 discusses ways to integrate small-group instruction into your English classes to provide brief but effective interventions, support, and reteaching for all students.

Chapter 5 discusses developing instructional reading libraries organized around a genre and related theme with books that represent the diverse reading needs of your students.

Chapter 6 shows how you can increase reading volume using core collections: a required core text and contemporary related texts. By gathering books related the core text's themes on diverse instructional reading levels, students can have choices and read far beyond the one required text.

Chapter 7 provides suggestions for ELA teachers for getting started and moving forward and the benefits of classroom libraries for math, social studies, and science teachers.