



Honoring Our Children as Trusted Book Co-Collaborators and Decision Makers

by DR. MARY HOWARD

The choices we make in the name of children are the tipping point to a spirit of joyful readerly becoming that fills the learning air we breathe each day.



LITERACY CHAMPION: MARY HOWARD

Mary Howard is often described as a “teachers’ teacher,” blending insight into research and practice with classroom realities. An educator for forty-nine years, she combines extensive experience as a special education, Title 1, and Reading Recovery teacher with a long-time role as reading specialist/coach. Mary continues to work in schools across the country as a literacy consultant. She is the author of *RTI from All Sides: What Every Teacher Needs to Know* (Heinemann, 2009) and *Good to Great Teaching: Focusing on the Literacy Work that Matters* (Heinemann, 2012).

One to Know: Books as an Invitation to Raise Volume through Time, Access, and Joyful Opportunities

Like so many of the children who enter our classrooms on any given day, my own entry into the book world was less than welcoming. Looking back on my school experiences, books were a blurry proposition with little time in the day dedicated to immersing us in books other than what now feels like the occasional obligatory read-aloud. Initially, I was more motivated by my students than myself and, although I was touched by each book, my internal desire beyond my teaching remained tentative. But five years into that slow professional rebirth, a single book marked the “awakening” of a newfound love. I wrote about this rebirth in [The Power of the Picture Books](#).

From those early days, I savored the words of literacy giants like Frank Smith, Richard Allington, and others who wrote tirelessly about reading volume. They fueled my passion to bathe

children in books through teacher-supported and student engaged reading that became the center of my efforts. I understood that this required a dedicated space to honor the books that could beckon readers to a growing collection constantly on display. I knew that access was essential, but I also knew this had to be accompanied with time and opportunity, so I became a living model by engaging with books in every possible way. My commitment to these beliefs became a gentle nudge for a book journey from the first day of school to the last. I knew that the choices I made in of the name of children would be the tipping point to creating a spirit of joyful *readerly becoming* that would fill the learning air we breathed each day.

As I look back on these experiences I am grateful for my long-awaited transformation inspired by the children who led me to unwavering book joy that continues still today. My hard-fought foray from confusion to disinterest and much later to sheer jubilation has accelerated my belief that the very promises I made to my students those many years ago are the birthright of *every* child. My book door remains wide open five decades later, but it serves as a constant reminder that no child should have to await entry. I have since embraced these perspectives as a professional imperative to dedicate energy to book awakening from the start. But we will never bring this imperative fully to life until we broaden our view from personal to school-wide collective commitment. Until book joy stretches to all corners of every school, it will remain a matter of real estate, or luck of the proverbial draw, based on what classroom children enter on a given day, week, or year.

What to Know: Re-envision Interventions as Text-Fueled Reading, Writing, Thinking, and Talking Experiences

My dedicated quest to understand the intervention process for our most fragile learners began the day I entered my special education classroom in small-town Missouri in 1972. As the only special education teacher assigned to a small section isolated from the main building, I was afforded a blessing. With no curriculum or instructional mandates standing in my way, I launched on a curiosity-fueled professional inquiry, driven by instincts and, despite my inexperience, one that may loosely be seen as action research. Books were the heart and soul of our learning day, which meant that fill-in-the-blank forms and worksheets were refuted in order to honor time to explore and have conversations that enriched the reading experience. Uncertain where I was headed, the joy of books, and the open invitations to talk about them, turned my room into the *University of Kids*, where children became my most treasured teachers. I still carry these lessons with me today.

Those early years defined my beliefs about the intervention process and the readers who too often slip through the “intervention-misconception” cracks using the traditional approaches that are all-too common. I’ve seen children relegated to a “fix-it room,” as if what happened in those thirty minutes away from the classroom seemed to be viewed as more relevant than the other six hours of the day. I watched the “in-addition to” spirit of interventions that were at the center of my Reading Recovery training replaced by an “instead-of” perspective that alleviates the responsibility of the first line of defense. And in an age when the “Science of Reading” frenzy is changing policy, I see interventions focused on isolated skill-and-drill of sounds rather than even considering that the books and conversations they inspire can and should precede,

accompany, and even replace a focus on sound-symbol relationships. These decisions are based on student need rather than politically driven one-size-fits-all dictates that now blind us to those options.

To this day, I am still inspired by the brilliance that unlimited book access awakened in my special education students because I was unfettered by the limiting expectations that too often derail our efforts. I join with other teachers who believe as much in the power and potential of books that can awaken the brilliance that resides in every child. Together, we fill the lives of our students with books and opportunities to engage them in meaningful, purposeful and yes, joyful ways. These beliefs have accelerated over the years, strengthened by others who keep books at the center of the intervention process and use them to open a book door to children long after those interventions are over.

What to Do: Honoring All Children Begins When We Notice and Celebrate this Unique Brilliance that Books Can Bring to Life

In spite of the many challenges Covid-19 has brought to education, it also afforded an opportunity to confront the many inequities the pandemic brought to the forefront. One critical opportunity has been embracing an asset-based rather than deficit-based lens. Many of us were relieved to learn that districts across the country had discontinued all standardized tests during the 2019-2020 school year. Sadly, our enthusiasm that education may finally be ready to address the flaws of a testing culture was short-lived. Talk about school-wide tests quickly resumed as a renewed deficit-based focus turned to “learning loss” discussions to justify them in spite of many experts who refuted this stance (see references). But standardized tests are just one example of our obsession for numerical data as our obsession has also grown for highly suspect computerized data collection sources often directly linked to equally suspect programs, scripts, and packages.

This data-based obsession has undermined our efforts to get books into the hands of children. Book-leveling systems such as reading levels, AR scores, Lexiles®, and others book identification systems manifested into labeling readers. How can telling children who they are as readers and force-feeding books based on scores help them to embark on a *readerly becoming* journey? How did measures meant to identify books morph into one used to define readers and narrow to a range of books we deem appropriate for them? Why do we numerically categorize readers without so much as a thought about the books that can give them a glimpse into a reading life in which they are afforded freedom to choose books based on interest, identity, and desire? Why are so many classroom and school libraries still carefully organized with visible levels, making school-imposed labels public as a way to assign data-based books irrespective of who children are as readers, thinkers, and humans. The loss of book control has led many children to seek out books with a number or letter attached rather than one that could speak to their heart in spite of the many outcries of literacy leaders like [Kylene Beers, who reminds us that “a kid is not an “H.”](#)

More to Know and Do: The “What Ifs” That Drive Me

I wonder what might happen if thoughtful ponderings inspired us all to contemplate a renewed belief in the powerful potential of book immersion in our schools. My own “What If” ponderings continue to inspire me to share this message everywhere I go:

- WHAT IF we replaced these rigid leveling systems with a flexible open-ended book exploratory system in which we supported a personal quest for books awaiting readers to find them?
- WHAT IF, instead of using numerical data to reduce books and thus children to a level, we created an option where children can use real-life motivators as internal measures that would bring books and children together?
- WHAT IF we engaged readers in inquiry-based conversations so that we might listen to and support their wonderings?
- WHAT IF we used those conversations as informants that offer insight into them as readers, and trusted those readers to point us in the right direction rather than categorically placing them in ‘data-fied’ book boxes with little hope of escape or motivation to do so?
- WHAT IF book choice became an exploratory invitation in which we can support their quest to find their way to books that would make them laugh, cry, dream, think, and ponder more of the same?
- WHAT IF we refuted the heartless mandates that tell students what book belongs in their hands and afforded the freedom to travel that winding book path led by their hearts and minds?
- WHAT IF we at last tackled the equity issue I wrote about and replaced it with voluminous joyful literacy opportunities I wrote about here?
- WHAT IF we made these promises to every child, regardless of where they fall in the literacy process at any given time?

What if?

References

Tackling a Serious Equity Issue: Voluminous Joyful Literacy Opportunities

<http://therobbreviewblog.com/uncategorized/voluminous-joyful-literacy-opportunities/>

The Power of the Picture Book

<http://strohreads.blogspot.com/2017/11/the-power-of-picture-book-dr-mary-howard.html>

“A Kid is not an “H.” <https://kylenebeers.com/blog/2012/04/09/a-kid-is-not-an-h/comment-page-1/>

Posts on the Myth of “Learning Loss”

What ‘learning loss’ really means (it’s not a loss of Learning by Rachael Gabriel

<http://wapo.st/3ter54y> (See the link at the top of this post for her ‘corona kids’ article)

The concept of “Learning Loss” is Complete BS by Teacher Tom <https://bit.ly/31DZk9P>

Learning Loss-Myth or Reality (Check) by Kathleen Brown <http://bit.ly/3bYQNEh>

A Learning Loss Debunkery Reader by Peter Greene (varied links) <http://bit.ly/3cK1Y2P>

Is Learning Lost: When Kids Are Out of School? by Alfie Kohn <https://bit.ly/32bgVqw>

Anti-Testing Activism During a Global Pandemic (Webinar) <http://bit.ly/3vCVk77>

The “Learning Loss” Pandemic and its Cures by John Merrow (via Diane Ravitch)

<https://bit.ly/3fxW1sV>

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