



The Power of Reader's Choice and Identity

by Lois Bridges

In her landmark book, *Cultivating Genius*, Gholdy Muhammad challenges us to reconsider the heart of teaching: "It is our job as educators to not just teach the skills, but also, to teach students to know, validate, and celebrate who they are (2020)."

At the core of every reader is a sense of self-identity that encompasses the reader's sociocultural background, language, values, perspectives, and developing knowledge of the world. Having the agency to choose your own books and craft a reading life that aligns with your identity is equity in action. Literacy as a civil right begins with defining yourself as a reader and choosing the books that will help you shape and expand your identity. As Julia Lopez-Robertson remarks, "All children deserve and have the right to see books representing their language, culture, traditions, and worlds in which they live" (2021).

If we heed Dr. Valerie Kinloch's (2015) call for equitable teaching and help our students develop as "critically conscious thinkers, knowers, doers, and change agents," then our students need to own and craft their own reading lives. Indeed, we maintain that equitable teaching is inseparable from readers' choice. Principal Don Vu gets right to the point: "What is the right book for each of your students? It depends on the kid. Not all Black boys will be interested in reading *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. Not all Asian girls will be interested in reading *A Single Shard* by Linda Sue Park. And that is why student choice is so important" (2021).

According to Scholastic's *Kids and Family Reading Report* (2014), young people of all ages maintain that their teachers and caregivers underestimate how hard it is for them to find books to read. First, teachers and librarians must invest time getting to know all students as readers, so they can identify books matching their students' interests and needs. Interest surveys provide rich information that teachers can use to build relationships with students and identify and collect books and reading material that they know will appeal to and engage their students. And through reading conferences, teachers can engage in "relentless book matching," helping students select what to read next, exposing them to new possibilities, encouraging them to expand their reading horizons, and validating their reading development and experiences (Harvey, Ward, Hoddinott, Carroll, 2021).

[Bookelicious](#) helps children establish reader agency, identity, and choice by leveraging AI technology. Children create bookmojis and then browse and select the books that are matched to them.

Reading choice and identity are intertwined with equity and social justice. Students need access to books and time and support to browse a wide range of books that provide the intellectual, social-emotional, joyful and soul-stirring nourishment they seek. In this way, students develop the agency to evaluate and select their own reading material and, thus, shape their own reading lives.

Case in point: consider this classroom vignette from Beethoven Elementary School in Chicago. With sponsorship from Bring Me A Book, third grade teacher Ms. Brunetta Washington introduced Bookelicious to her students, and was delighted by their response—they thoroughly enjoyed the experience of creating bookmojis. Students then browsed the books their bookmoji selected for them, chose the books that they most wanted to read, and created Reading Wish Lists of their favorites.

Ms. Washington became somewhat concerned, however, when her students started sharing their Reading Wish Lists with each other. She thought they might decide to “jump on the bandwagon” and change their selections to match the books their classmates had selected. But that didn’t happen. Indeed, Ms. Washington said that one student who had selected a science book stuck with it— which surprised Ms. Washington who noted that the student had “zoned into books she had always wanted but had never been able to get.”

Ultimately, Ms. Washington was amazed at how wide-ranging the individual book choices were for each of her students. She also noted that, even though she has been teaching these particular students all year, the bookmojis each child created, reflecting his or her reading interests, enabled her to get to know them better “at a deeper level.”

The Thrill of Personal Choice

Students are thrilled when they get to choose their own books. Research has frequently found that self-selection is the hook that snags both children and teens and convinces them to read:

- Allowing students to self-select their books results in more involvement and thus more motivation to read (Sewell, 2003; Gallager, 2009; Pruzinsky, 2014).
- Self-selection allows students more latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in, as well as developing an ownership of the reading process (Kragler, 2000).
- Students choose books that match their personal interests—both narrative and expository texts. Kids are also drawn to books that their friends or other trusted readers recommend (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006).

Of course, children benefit from help—they grow into self-selection with parent or teacher guidance and thoughtful scaffolding.

Closing Thoughts

Global Teacher award-winning Nancie Atwell (2016) also considers reader's choice, time, and pleasure essential. In her classroom and school (Center for Teaching and Learning), choice is a given: "Kids choose what they read because children who choose books are more likely to grow up to become adults who read books. Students who read only a steady diet of assigned titles don't get to answer, for themselves, the single most important question about book reading: why does anyone want to? (2007). She writes:

Every day, smart, well-meaning teachers erect instructional roadblocks between their students and the pure pleasure of the personal art of reading. There it is: the P word. I know, because I've felt it, too, that there's a sense of uneasiness among teachers and parents about an approach like a reading workshop. Shouldn't there be some pedagogic strings attached here? Some paper and pencil and small-group activities that look like schoolwork? Because otherwise, isn't reading class, well, too enjoyable?

We need to get over it. When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy and love reading.

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