Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 17
Issue 1 *What's Cool in Your School*

Article 16

2001

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Recommended Citation

Bloem, Pat and Scheidel, Kari (2001) "Reforming Reading Reform," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 16.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1344>

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Professional Book Review

Reforming Reading Reform

Pat Bloem and Kari Scheidel

Richard Allington's books need to be better known. School administrators and K-8 teachers, especially those who are weary from trying to teach readers in the current climate of one-size fits all basalized curricula, will find his new book, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs* (Addison Wesley Longman, 2001) insightful, practical, and full of common sense. Written in an informal, conversational style that makes for compelling reading, it deserves a prominent place in our discussions of how we should be teaching children—whether they struggle or not—to read.

Allington, who began his teaching career in the Kent City (MI) Public Schools and later directed a Title I program in Belding, Michigan, is now a senior spokesperson for academic reading researchers and a key voice of protest in the current debates about reading policy, in what he calls the "lunacy of the current reading reform movement." As far too many of us can attest, current reading "reforms" mandate that we use certain materials even if we dislike them, and mandate that we use certain methods and programs as though one size fits all children, even though classrooms include an amazing diversity of skills, backgrounds, and interests. It is Allington's insistence that teachers must teach thoughtful literacy and must create more students who not only can read but do read, that

we, a teacher of preservice teachers (Pat) and a freshly minted teacher-to-be (Kari), find especially powerful.

Allington believes that students will learn what we teach them. Thus, if we teach them that reading is really a matter of correct pronunciation, they will become fluent oral readers, and if reading "tasks are primarily remembering tasks, then . . . students will get better at remembering" (94). The problem with the way reading is currently organized, Allington points out, is that we have "too often confused remembering with understanding" (93), have routinely ignored what we know about how to teach reading effectively, especially for those who struggle (2), and have filled our students' language arts time with short activities, rather than time to read and write and read some more. While Allington believes our children read better than the press largely gives them credit for, he cites three main literacy challenges: to make schools work for all children, even those whose parents are poor or illiterate; to reach the higher levels of literacy thinking—such as synthesizing and evaluating—necessary for this technological age; and to fight aliteracy. In each chapter he argues for action based on research, not in order to standardize reading lessons, or to proclaim the one best way, since he is certain that there is not one best way. Rather, he cites research so that we can refocus on what really matters. He organizes his book, then, on the principles that "really matter": kids need to read a lot (Chapter 2), they need books they can read (Chapter 3), they need to read fluently (Chapter 4), and they need to develop thoughtful literacy (Chapter 5). Although he mentions struggling readers throughout the

book, and addresses their needs specifically in Chapter 6, his principles hold true for all readers.

. . . teachers and educators will resonate to his sensible ideas on how kids need books they can read and how they need to read a lot, a lot more than they usually do in most classrooms

Since we worry that our current elementary curricula creates students who are literate but hate to read, and students who can remember details but can't think critically, we found ourselves alternately cheering and mulling over his solutions. Near the end of her teacher-assisting semester, Kari noted this in her journal:

I had an opportunity to watch a fourth-grade boy develop what Allington would call thoughtful literacy last semester during my teacher assisting semester. Brian attended the Resource Room and could be classified as a lazy student. He never got right to work on his reading series' worksheets and constantly turned them in late even though he clearly was a child of great intelligence and was more than capable of completing them.

His mother did not have extra money for books, but she took him to the library. When his cousin told him to read the "cool" Christopher Paul Curtis' book, Bud, Not Buddy, he absolutely loved it. Somehow he found out I had read it too, and he started coming to me daily to tell me what made him love the book. Our conversations showed me that he had a deep sense of thoughtful literacy; he just didn't show this same comprehension and enthusiasm in class.

The sad piece to the story is that the school and the teacher did not help Brian develop thoughtful literacy. That was only being fed from home, and at school, he still doesn't do his worksheets. What are we doing wrong for him in school? Why is he able to show all of the higher level thinking skills with books he has read at home? How am I as a new teacher

going to reach my students and foster thoughtful literacy?

Allington offers us practical answers to Kari's questions. Where we felt the book let us down, however, was the second half of Chapter 1. To new teachers or to those not acquainted with reading legislation, Allington's critique of the Reading Excellence Act (REA) and of what the REA labels "scientifically-based" reading research will not be enough. What difference exactly does REA and its limited definition of reading research make to a typical classroom teacher? Allington doesn't say. For readers who are not privy to information about current debates, who need more information to understand why Allington's position matters and matters urgently, the last half of Chapter One feels as though he is writing in shorthand. Essentially, what the book lacks is a clear context and complete explanation of the political realities that made this book necessary.

Even without this context, though, teachers and educators will resonate to his sensible ideas on how kids need books they can read and how they need to read a lot, a lot more than they usually do in most classrooms. Again, here is a note from Kari's journal:

In my current student teaching placement in an urban kindergarten, we go to the library once a week. The paraprofessional picks a story, based on the letter of the week, to read aloud. Then the students quickly pick out a book, with the whole visit lasting 15 minutes. The children bring the books back into the room and after a few minutes of perusing, place them into a crate. This is where they stay until the next week, when the students return to the library. The books are not allowed to go home. The kids NEVER touch them again. I asked the classroom teacher about it. She said it is because "these" kids have no idea how to handle books. Now my teacher is wonderful at making young children feel welcomed at school, but how does she think they are going to learn how to handle books without giving them experience?

Classmates of Kari's describe classrooms where students' time rereading a couple of pages of basal lessons and answering written questions is plentiful, even though their access to books and freedom to choose their own books are limited. Others describe teachers who schedule Silent Sustained Reading time each day, but require that students who are behind in their homework, often the ones who need to read the most, use that time to catch up. Still others talk about the paucity of books for the children to check out, especially of books that match the reading levels of those students who struggle. In effect, some schools give students no access to appropriate books. How different Allington's emphasis is from what Kari and her classmates describe. "All too frequently," says Allington, "I enter schools where it is it hard to imagine that any but the most determined will ever learn to read" (69).

In a section titled Supporting Professional Growth, Allington suggests spending professional development money for teachers on reading groups as an alternative to the typical workshop. Calling it TAPER, or Teachers as Professional Education Readers, Allington suggests that groups of three to seven members pick a text for the group to read, discuss, and perhaps apply. That idea seems to us to be the perfect idea for how *What Really Matters* might be read. But whether teachers read this alone or for group discussion, for ideas of how to better meet the needs of their struggling readers or for all students, teachers need to hear Allington's message. Allington's concluding words bring the ideas of school reform to those most vitally involved: the teachers.

Finally, remember that in the end it will still be teachers who make a difference in children's school lives. It is teachers who will either lead the change or resist and stymie it. The focus of school change has to be on supporting teachers . . . But bureaucracies rarely give up power easily and they rarely seem to improve people . . . No one knows your students as well as you do and no one knows their needs better. In the end, it is unlikely that anyone else in the bureaucracy cares

more about your students than you. So fight for them when you must. (148)

Allington's message is an affirming one for those who want to teach reading as professionals, who believe that we can figure out what is best for our students and can give them what they need. Certainly his book can help us see our dilemmas and the reading curricula conundrums with clarity. He may also give us the strength to fight for our students right now, in the midst of this talk of reform.

About the Author

Pat Bloem teaches English Education at Grand Valley State University.

Kari Scheidel is a member of both NCTE and MRA. She graduated from Grand Valley State University in April 2001 with a major in elementary education.