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Professional Book Review

Diana Mitchell

Finding Answers in New Places: Two for Teachers' Bookshelves

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm's *You Gotta BE the Book* points out something many of us secondary teachers have somehow missed—readers don't automatically become engaged in reading and thus aren't automatically ready to respond to the literature we ask them to read. This lack of engagement occurs because these "less proficient readers" don't see pictures or images as they read. Because they read words, working

so hard to decode, many of them are unaware that others envision or see images as they read.

As Wilhelm so capably points out, these students do not enter the story world, do not know how to "envision" on their own. And furthermore, if the visualization does not occur, then they are unable to respond in any of the other response demeanors.

Thus we have all been more-or-less missing the boat with our resistant or hard-to-reach students. We've been spending our energy cooking up exciting ways that students can respond to literature. We haven't spent time figuring out how to help these students SEE so they can get into the story.

But fear not. Wilhelm does a brilliant job of showing us how to do this. Before I let my excitement and admiration of this book lead me to gush interminably, let me describe the structure of the book so you can see Wilhelm's path to uncovering what I call "the missing link."

Wilhelm noticed in his seventh grade classroom the "gaping difference" between his own attitude toward reading and that of many of his students. In searching for ways to understand how to help these students, he decided to start by working to uncover what three of his most able students "do" when they are engaged in their reading. Once he gathered this information through such methods as interviews, student journaling, and observation, he turned to his

central concern—how might less engaged readers be helped to read in the way that engaged readers do and maybe become readers themselves? What could be done in the classroom?

Next, Wilhelm looked at three of his reluctant readers and what happened to them as readers through his use of several drama techniques. He found that these less engaged readers view reading as passive—something they are supposed to figure out correctly so they can answer teacher questions. He worked to help these readers learn to think differently about the reading act and learn how to participate in the experience. These three readers responded to "story theater" in which the text was used as a script and in "story drama" in which the text was used as a starting point. Through physically dramatizing a text, the story became real to these readers as it became something they could imagine and get inside of.

Wilhelm found, however, that there was still a group of the less proficient readers who didn't respond to drama. Through his research he was aware that work had been done on art as a response to literature, so he tried this next. The results were phenomenal, especially with his special needs students.

What all this says to me is that we have to teach or model the strategies that will allow our students to enter the story world. It isn't something all students come to naturally since most of

the less proficient readers haven't been read to or haven't seen picture books as little children. So if children don't come from a literature-rich environment, they need help activating strategies or "moves" necessary to really get into the book. Wilhelm demonstrates how to do this by giving specific information on all the strategies he talks about.

Wilhelm uses research into reading and literature teaching to inform his classroom research. But what he found was that most research assumed students were already engaged readers. Instead of using this information to view his students as deficit, he uses it to uncover how he can help his students learn to "engage" in reading. Thus I call this book the "missing link" in reading and literature study. We knew our students needed basic decoding skills which we assumed they mastered in elementary school. But from there we jumped to asking our students to respond or react to literature. It never occurred to most of us (myself included) that all those words were just that, words, to some of our students. Because we as language arts teachers are readers, we assumed that if the words didn't jump to life for our students then their decoding skills must be deficient. I love this book because it shows us a new direction, a new way to help our students become readers. I also love this book because of the way Wilhelm approaches his students. He doesn't make the assumption that something is wrong with them; he just keeps working until he finds the keys to help them unlock previously unopened doors.

This book is a must-read since it addresses an area that has scarcely been touched on before. It teaches us how to be better literature teachers by showing us how to help our students become engaged readers.

Another book that takes a look at reaching the hard-to-reach is Janet Allen's *It's Never Too Late*. This book is chock-full of rich stories about her successes and failures and of strategies that Allen used to help her remedial high school readers become engaged readers. Her book is not only overflowing with ideas, it is overflowing with her wisdom on how to help her hard-to-reach stu-

dents succeed. She knows the often unarticulated truths about dealing with students who perceive themselves to be failures—how important encouragement is, how important it is to confront students' views of their own failure, how important it is to help them see that they could be fully functioning readers.

Drawing on research and her own experience, she understands that it is passivity that can doom these students. "It is this very passivity, at least in terms of academics, that I have found often characterizes students in special programs or resource classes. They wait for work. They wait for something to happen. They wait to get out of school. As passive nonreaders, they wait for reading to happen to them, not knowing that reading doesn't work that way" (155).

Thus one of her focuses is on helping students see reading as an active process that they have to participate in. Throughout the book, she carefully explains how she helps kids develop their own reading strategies and be aware of what they are doing as they read.

Allen also thinks about the research she reads, looks at her classroom for verification, and then makes necessary changes. One example of this practice was her willingness to look at how she handled vocabulary or word lists, the staple of many English teachers. From her research she learned that to predetermine which words students might need to know made them more dependent on the teacher and less independent as readers. She recognized that when she gave out word lists before the stories she was giving strong support to the notion that the only way to figure words out is by looking them up in the dictionary. Keeping this in mind, she stopped doing these "before the story" words and instead focused on ways she and her students could work together to determine the meaning of unknown words and develop a deeper understanding of words they might know peripherally (103). At the beginning of the year students could only articulate two strategies to use if they didn't know a word: look it up in the dictionary or sound it out. By the end of the year they could articulate twelve different strategies they could use!

Allen also knows that all the reading and writing that went on in her class had to be “afloat on a sea of talk.” She says, “In my twenty years of teaching I had found that students in lower tracks were often relegated to classrooms that had virtually eliminated talk. I also knew that if I continued a practice based on silence and worksheets, I was denying students access to a system based on one’s ability to use language” (112). Thus her classroom often hummed with talk as students made connections between their reading and their world.

Allen also shows she knows the old adage, “Let them choose their own book and they will read,” simply wasn’t enough for her students. Choice is one of the cornerstones of her philosophy, but she realizes that with years of failure behind them, simply putting an interesting book in the hands of these less proficient readers doesn’t do the job. And so she tried everything she could to involve her students—she read aloud to them, she gave them the choice of listening to a book on a tape, the class read and responded to stories and used creative dramatics.

She talks about the importance of reading aloud, of activating prior knowledge, of bringing art into the reading classroom. She notices many of the same things Wilhelm discusses in *You Gotta BE the Book*: the importance of seeing reading as more than a passive activity; the necessity of helping students enter into the world of the story; the importance of art and drama in meaning making.

This book is overwhelmingly honest. Allen talks about her failures and about what she doesn’t know. She does know that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t work with students. She helps us see that each one holds the key that can help us unlock their reading potential.

This is a spectacular book, not only because we can learn specific strategies to use with our own students but because of the model that Allen provides for us as teachers. She does not view her students as lacking or deficient, but as challenges to teach her how to teach them. She values what her students say and listens to them carefully. She reads and searches for information that can help her become a better teacher, and she is

willing to try out different approaches with her students, recognizing that they are the bottom line. If their reading growth is enhanced, she uses the new approaches. If a strategy doesn’t work, she doesn’t first blame the students and then dismiss it. She looks to see if she gave them enough time and enough preparation before she dismisses an idea. She doesn’t expect immediate results but does recognize all the affective issues that students bring to class with them that can get in the way of their learning. She realizes she can’t undo eight or ten years of failure in school in one year (although she still does feel she’s failed!).

But her book doesn’t end with the last page of the last chapter. Her appendix is also packed with useful things for teachers who want to know more about their students’ reading tastes and abilities in order to move forward. She not only includes her own research methodology but also the surveys she used throughout the year, evaluation prompts, and student-generated reading surveys.

Janet Allen’s got attitude—a very positive attitude.

I feel like I want to go through her book and just make a long list called “The Wisdom of Janet Allen,” and then I would take it out and read it whenever I needed reassurance. For me, reading Allen’s book was inspirational. It validated my own classroom observations, made me feel I was on the right track, and gave me many, many places to start in helping students be truly engaged readers.

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About the Author

Diana Mitchell, co-director of the Red Cedar Writing Project, President-Elect of MCTE, and co-editor of LAJM, is retired from public school teaching.