

# IGNITING A PASSION FOR READING

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING LIFETIME READERS

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FOREWORD BY GAIL BOUSHEY AND JOAN MOSER, "THE SISTERS"



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## CHAPTER 1

# The Missing Objective in the Teachers' Reading Lesson Plans: Igniting a Passion by Targeting Aliterate Readers

**I**t was early afternoon at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, a building with attendance boundaries that include a women's substance abuse shelter, two homeless shelters, and a domestic violence shelter. A school with a mobility rate so high the principal told me that some teachers had, by May, an entirely different set of students than they had at the beginning of the year.

I had just finished giving an "author" talk to a group of very attentive fourth and fifth graders. As the students lined up with their teachers to exit the gym, Marie Boone made her way to where I was standing. I stared down into the earnest eyes of this precious child as she said, "What could someone do if they are only in fifth grade, but they know they want to write books? What advice could you give?" She then asked me, "What are the best colleges for someone who loves to read and wants to write books?"

Marie and I had a very mature conversation that afternoon. Her words spoke to me of her love affair with books and of the hope she found in reading. Despite what I later learned were tremendous hardships in her young life, it was evident to me that Marie was going places. Her experiences with books hinted at a way out. Marie had dreams; books had given her a vision for the future.

The brief opportunity I had to interact with the administration and staff at Marie's school made it clear to me that they were pulling out all the stops to give Marie and the other boys and girls a reason to dream. I knew that the administration viewed reading as a critical component for success because following the author talk they had me present a session for parents on promoting reading at home. At the end of the parent meeting, the school provided a free hardcover book for every child to take home. The way money is spent provides a window into our priorities, doesn't it? In the case of this particular school, the investment both financially and emotionally is in changing lives. They've come to the realization that books are one of the best tools at their disposal and that fostering a love of reading is their best chance to succeed. I applaud them.

A part of me was reluctant to leave Woodrow Wilson School that day. I wanted to join their mission right then and there! Practically speaking, I could not uproot my family and cancel other commitments to take a job in the school, but I sensed they understood the need to make the book-to-kid connection come alive and that had tremendous drawing power for me. On the flight home, I was burdened by my seeming inability to contribute in some way to these children. A solution came just as the wheels of the airplane hit the pavement.

When I arrived home, I drafted a letter to little Marie. I labored over the letter as if it were a graduate school thesis. Everything had to be perfect. I had done what I could for the larger group of parents and children with the time that I had, but Marie had come to me, specifically, looking for help. My letter gave her every reason to pursue her dream, every reason to believe it could happen. I gave her a "best book" list, and I told her that I believed in her. Then, I autographed some of my books to her and prepared them for shipping. I pulled the letter back out and added the P.S. "These books aren't a gift, Marie. We're *trading*. I'll be looking for a box of books you've authored arriving at my house someday in the future."

So goes fostering the love of reading in young people. Sometimes it's one child at a time, as in Marie's case. Other times we ignite the flame, a passion for books, in an entire roomful of young people all at once and then take all the right steps to keep it burning. For those educators who've lived it, there's no greater joy. My concern is that the teachers who *have* experienced this phenomenon are far too few in number, and that's the reason for this book.

Literacy skills have always been a precursor to success. Those who can read and write well become powerful communicators; such people are the movers and shakers of society in many cases. While this has always been true, today more than ever, strong literacy skills are a critical survival asset in a fast-paced, technological world (The Conference Board et al. 2006). More information is available today than at any time in history, and we have access to it more rapidly. Such advantages are meaningless, though, to those who cannot read or to those whose reading skills are so underdeveloped that comprehending a substantial or complex text structure is a seemingly insurmountable hurdle. In today's society, adults and schoolchildren whose reading abilities are deficient are treading water in a pool that has no shallow end.

It would seem that there is every reason to believe that school-age struggling readers are going to receive help—at least in the United States. Our federal, state, and local governments and agencies are enacting legislation left and right in an attempt to hold every person receiving a paycheck for working in public schools accountable for the students' success in reading. The focus on skills testing is unparalleled. It is also, in my opinion, unconscionable because it quietly propagates the idea that if we can identify weaknesses in skills and correct them, America's reading troubles will be abated.

Many educators categorize certain struggling readers as *disabled*—those whose skills do not allow them to comprehend text. They lack the ability; hence, the term *disabled*. My concern, and the focus of this book, is for another population of readers who are not disabled per se—for they do have the ability to read. However, they are reluctant to become involved with books and/or the reading process in general. They are, in essence, *disengaged* readers. Such students are too often forgotten by lawmakers, education pundits, and school boards, and the reason is simple: fostering a love of reading in kids is not a curricular objective. It's not tested by the state, it's not a component of any federal legislation, it's not in the district strategic plan, nor is it likely the focal point of any methodology courses at the local college or university. Despite the National Reading Panel's (2000) citing numerous studies that draw correlations between the amount of time children and young adults spend reading and their subsequent improvement in vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension, we don't seem overly concerned with making reading an attractive choice for kids.

It would appear, then, that children don't need any help learning to love to read—it must just happen automatically. Right? Ask any practicing teacher if such automaticity is true for the majority of students these days and get ready for a very negative response. It's not necessarily that students *can't* read, it's that many of them *don't*. People, both children and adults, who have the ability but not the desire to read are termed *aliterates* (Mikulecky 1979), and they should be a source of concern for a nation that wants “no child left behind.” The age-old concern of why Johnny can't read needs to change with the times. A new question, *Why won't Johnny read, even if he can?* needs some of our serious and undivided attention.

For most of my career, I have heard there is a keen desire to develop children as readers. It's been trumpeted by nearly everyone I've met who has any stake whatsoever in the educational process, yet I wonder if there exists among us even the most basic agreement on what a reader—a complete reader—really is. Figure 1.1 is a simple chart I created to visually explain to any listening audience what I mean when I call a child a reader. If I tell you that Bobby is a reader, you can bet that this kid has both the *skill* and the *will* to read. He can read, and he wants to. I don't worry so much about whether the left side of my circle is receiving appropriate attention with regard to personnel, funding, and instructional time, but I have grave concerns about the right side of the circle. When was the last time you had an inservice on issues related to teaching the *will* of reading? What exactly does that look like in first grade or in seventh? I spend nearly all my time answering that question to crowds of teachers for one simple reason: the affective component of reading education has not been a focus in most of their training.

If you believe, as I do, that reading is a choice and that it is not humanly possible to make anyone of any age read anything, then perhaps some time spent looking at how we can impact students in such a way that they will be more likely to make the choice to read deserves our attention. One of my favorite quotes of all time came from a classroom teacher who, all the way back in 1915, said:

*It should be the teacher's aim to give every child a love of reading, a hunger for it that will stay with him through all the years of his life. If a child has that he will acquire the mechanical part without difficulty. (Mayne 1915, 40)*

FIGURE 1.1

A COMPLETE READER

