

# Literacy Is the Gateway to Learning

## INTRODUCTION

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*“So it is with children who learn to read fluently and well: They begin to take flight into whole new worlds as effortlessly as young birds take to the sky.”*

—William James

Literacy is most simply defined as the ability to read and write. Further digging will provide a variety of more robust definitions, including – literacy is the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential. Without a doubt, literacy is the learning on which all other learning is based. Reading, in particular, is key to success in school and beyond. Reading gaps can and do hinder children from achievement in all subjects and at all levels, not to mention the impact that being able to read has on a student’s ability to create his or her own path beyond school.

There has been much written and even debated about the critical components of teaching kids to read. How to educate and nurture a truly literate child is a puzzle that requires many pieces. Parents, teachers, school officials, community members, society at large, a variety of programs and strategies all contribute in some way to how – and how well – a child learns to read.

One component that is universally recognized as critical to learning to read is consistent practice with and ready access to books. If children are to move from knowing that letters make words and that words have meaning to truly reading for information and for pleasure, there must be books available. Books that interest them, books that challenge them, books that delight them, books that inform them – all are key to engaging young students in the act of reading. And it is that very act that makes them better and more fluent readers.

Practice reading can and should take a variety of forms. Text that is provided by the teacher or included in prescribed textbooks or activities is critical in helping educators and parents identify where their children excel with reading and where they lag behind. Also key is access to a variety of books about a variety of topics that interest young readers. Access to books in classrooms and at home can make the difference between a child who reads and one who does not. This access can and does encourage students to choose a book, open it up, and practice the skill that is the key to all learning.

**DR. ANN FERRELL** is a long-time educator with a passion for helping kids learn to read and continue reading throughout their lives. A retired principal who started her career as a reading specialist working with high school students who were reading significantly below grade level, she recognized then and now that early literacy is key to success in school and that access to a variety of books is a significant part of not just learning to read – but loving to read. Dr. Ferrell’s post-retirement consulting work is centered around supporting principals as they identify and develop teacher leaders, as well as working with teams to strengthen Professional Learning Community at the elementary level. She still visits classrooms often and is always on the lookout for a good book!

Classroom and home libraries provide immediate access for students to take that first step to choose a book. In order for kids to become better readers they must be engaged in the process, and choice can be the driver of that engagement. Classroom libraries, by their very presence, demonstrate that books and reading are valued. Classroom libraries show that “my teacher knows me and knows what I’m interested in and has books right here in my classroom to help me explore that interest.” Home libraries send the same message – “at my house there are books for me to read and enjoy and read to my parents and siblings. Reading is important.”

While school and public libraries continue to be magical settings for kids to visit and peruse and utilize, classroom and home libraries are equally important. Sadly, not all kids have access to the public library – no way to get there or no one to take them. The school media center is extraordinary, no doubt, but it’s down the hall, and it’s not always available in the moment.


Classroom and home libraries are there and they are there right now. And right now is the perfect time to choose a book. And choosing a book that taps into kids’ interests – at school and at home – is key to engaging even the most reluctant readers. Reading the books that are filled with topics and stories that kids are interested in will encourage them to do what they must do to become stronger and better readers – keep reading.

## RESEARCH

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Literacy is the gateway to all learning. It requires a systematic approach to the teaching of fundamental skills as well as access to materials for the practice of reading to develop fluency. Without fluency, students will struggle in all other subjects, so time and attention to the practice of reading during the critical skill-building years is essential.

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### Literacy Needs to be Practiced to Grow

Developing strong literacy skills requires daily practice. According to James Kim, an assistant professor at Harvard University, “Things like decoding, letter knowledge, and word reading skills are very susceptible to decay without frequent practice.”<sup>1</sup> Richard Allington, professor of literacy studies at the University of Tennessee, compared the slide in reading ability to an athlete’s fitness: “Just like hockey players lose some of their skills if they stay off their skates and off the ice for three months, children who do not read in the summer lose two to three months of reading development.”<sup>2</sup>

According to a statement issued by the National Council of Teachers of English, “The more one reads, the better one reads. The more one reads, the more knowledge of words and language one acquires. The more one reads, the more fluent one becomes as a reader. The more one reads, the easier it becomes to sustain the mental effort necessary to comprehend complex texts.”<sup>3</sup>

## ***Students should be reading 35-45 minutes a day.***

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In order to develop strong reading skills, students need access to books in the classroom and at home. Classroom libraries, take-home book packs, and at-home libraries allow students to practice reading skills and engage in literacy with others. Offering a variety of texts in the classroom and at home engages advanced and reluctant readers. A broad range of literacy materials fosters enrichment, confidence, proficiency, curiosity, and reading enjoyment.

Teachers College Reading and Writing Project recommends that students should be reading 35-45 minutes a day.<sup>4</sup> Independent reading helps students become more facile readers and contributes to overall school achievement, especially when schools set aside time for it in class. Educators Kylen Beers and Bob Probst show a direct correlation between reading time and class percentile in their book *Disruptive Thinking: Why How We Read Matters*.<sup>5</sup> Granting access to enjoyable books not only in the library, but in the classroom and at home allows a reader to read for enjoyment and become a stronger reader.

### **Books need to be where the kids are—in the library, classroom, online, and at home**

Classroom libraries are essential. Not every student feels comfortable in a library, and for many students, the classroom library may be the only place they have free access to reading materials.

According to the US Department of Education, “2.5 million children across the country are enrolled in districts where there are no libraries and 13 million children are enrolled in districts where the children’s materials circulation is less than 10 per student, including 3.4 million students in poverty and 6.6 million students of color.”<sup>6</sup>

A great classroom library provides teachers with the ability to implement a variety of reading experiences such as read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. According to a report by the National Reading Panel, independent reading time has been shown to “increase students’ skills and achievements, empower and engage students with reading and learning, increase student’s love of reading, and create a culture of sharing among students.” The report goes on to say: “There has been widespread agreement in the literature that encouraging students to engage in wide, independent, silent reading increases reading achievement. Literally hundreds of correlational studies find that the best readers read the most and that poor readers read the least. These correlational studies suggest that the more that children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.”<sup>7</sup>

The NCTE’s official position on classroom libraries states: “classroom libraries offer ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with students as individuals to find books that will ignite their love for learning, calm their fears, answer their questions, and improve their lives in any of the multiple ways that only literature can.”<sup>8</sup>

## ***A classroom library can reduce stress and anxiety and develop positive habits***

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Moreover, a classroom library can reduce stress and anxiety and develop positive habits. According to a 2009 study conducted by the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, reading can reduce stress levels by as much as 68 percent, even more than listening to music or going for a walk. Study co-author Dr. David Lewis, a neuropsychologist at Mindlab International at Sussex, found that participants who engaged in just six minutes of reading experienced a slowed heart rate and reduced muscle tension. “It really doesn’t matter what book you read, by losing yourself in a thoroughly engrossing book, you can escape from the worries and stresses of the everyday world and spend a while exploring the domain of the author’s imagination.”<sup>9</sup>

**Fostering equitable access to books is critical. Children need a large variety of engaging, high-quality books in their homes. However, not every household has the resources to provide a sufficient amount of books for their children.**

According to USA Reads, a national initiative of the World Literacy Foundation, “In America alone, almost 60% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not own a single book and one in four children struggle to read and write. These numbers are continuously growing.”<sup>10</sup>

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, faculty members Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen completed a three-year study showing a significantly higher level of reading achievement in students who received books for summer reading at home.

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***According to their study, “Spending roughly \$40 to \$50 a year on free books for each child began to alleviate the achievement gap that occurs in the summer.”<sup>11</sup>***

Findings published in the journal *Social Science Research* show that raising a child in a home filled with books positively impacts their future academic growth and job attainment. Specifically, as *Pacific Standard* reported, the study found that when it comes to standardized tests, “Regardless of how many books the family already has, each addition to the home library helps children do better.”<sup>12</sup> A book-filled home encourages a culture of reading for enjoyment and talking about books.

Take-home literacy book bags can engage families in literacy and learning. “Surveys given after the implementation of the program depict stronger positive feelings towards school. It can be inferred that the take-home literacy bags program had a positive effect on families’ feelings towards school.”<sup>13</sup>

Books in the home allow students to read and learn when students do not have an internet connection in their homes. According to the Pew Research Center, “Some 15% of U.S. households with school-age children do not have a high-speed internet connection at home...School-age children in lower-income households are especially likely to lack broadband access.

“Roughly one-third (35%) of households with children ages 6 to 17 and an annual income below \$30,000 a year do not have a high-speed internet connection at home, compared with just 6% of such households earning \$75,000 or more a year. These broadband gaps are particularly pronounced in Black and Hispanic households with school-age children – especially those with low incomes.” <sup>14</sup>

### Readers Need Diverse Texts and Choice:

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael K. Smith Wilhelm in their book *Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—And Why We Should Let Them*, state: “students are not going to become lifelong readers if they don’t find pleasure in reading.” According to their research, students need three things to be able to find pleasure in reading: ability, a positive attitude about reading, and the right book.<sup>15</sup>

Readers need access to engaging books. University of Tennessee faculty members Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen note, “studies show that it doesn’t take neurosurgery or banging away at basic skills to enable the brain to develop the ability to read: It takes lots of reading and rereading of text that students find engaging and comprehensible.” <sup>16</sup>

Librarian and teacher Donalyn Miller emphasizes four crucial elements for creating successful readers: 1) time to read in school 2) access to books that are intellectually and culturally accessible 3) choice and 4) reading community.<sup>17</sup>

In an article entitled, *The Impact of Pleasure Reading*, researchers discovered, “Pleasure reading builds reading comprehension, increases background knowledge (which is useful in all content areas), increases student vocabulary skills, and has been shown to increase our understanding of human behavior and help us to empathize with others (Murphy, 2013). Pleasure readers not only experience greater success academically than their non-reading counterparts, pleasure readers go on to experience greater success in the workforce (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007).” <sup>18</sup>

The International Reading Association suggests, “a child should be able to select within the classroom a new book to read each day. This averages to about seven books per student in each classroom library. In addition, it is recommended that one new book per student should be added to every classroom library.” <sup>19</sup> Richard Allington (2012), author of *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers*, recommends at least 500 different books for a classroom library. <sup>20</sup> A classroom library that offers a variety of books—fiction, nonfiction, culturally relevant, and high interest titles—engages readers of all levels and interests.

Most importantly, having a wide range of stories helps students avoid forming generalizations about various groups of people. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie states in her 2009 video, *The Dangers of a Single Story*: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete...they make one story become the only story.” Adichie goes on to say, “The consequence of the single story emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.” <sup>21</sup>

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***Students’ reading fluency in second and third grade has dropped by an additional 30% due to the pandemic***

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## **Literacy Helps Social-Emotional Learning**

According to a statement made by the National Council of Teachers of English, “Having choice and time for independent reading allows students to connect with characters and develop a new awareness of how others experience the world. Likewise, this practice can also affirm students’ own experiences of a world they potentially feel very isolated in. Independent reading provides students an opportunity to explore topics they might not otherwise have a chance to and equips them with a multitude of lenses through which to see the world.” <sup>22</sup>

Empathy is a vital skill for students to learn, and reading allows students to stand in the shoes of another person and understand a new perspective. According to the results of the 2019 Economist Intelligence survey, “Eighty percent of educators from across 15 countries believe positive emotions are critical for academic success, and emotional well-being is crucial for developing foundational literacies and communication skills.” <sup>23</sup>

Moreover, a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies involving more than 270,000 students showed “those who participated in evidence-based SEL programs showed an 11 percentile-point gain in academic achievement.” They also showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school. <sup>24</sup>

The 2019 Social and Emotional Learning Report from McGraw-Hill found that “81% of parents believe that SEL is just as important as academic learning.” <sup>25</sup> Six of the Top 10 skills identified by the World Economic Forum involve social and emotional competence.

Children require a broad array of skills, attitudes, character traits, and values to succeed in school, careers, and beyond. Literature helps students understand and learn these skills. Reading allows one to think and respond to another’s actions.

## **Time is of the Essence**

While reading skills have been in decline for a long time—in 2017, 37 percent of US students and only 22 percent of low-income students are reading proficiently by the fourth grade—the pandemic has impacted literacy development in unimaginable ways that will affect children for a generation. <sup>26</sup>

Ben Domingue, professor at Stanford University, published a 2020 study that found, “students in general did not develop any reading skills during the spring.... growth stalled when schooling was interrupted and remained stagnant throughout the summer.” Despite literacy rates creeping up soon afterward, “the growth was not robust enough to make up from the gaps in the spring,” illustrating life-altering changes that these children would never know occurred. <sup>27</sup>

This study also discovered that students’ reading fluency in second and third grade was now approximately 30% behind what would be expected in a typical year.

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The good news is that 95 percent of Americans consider childhood literacy important. “Our collective understanding that childhood literacy matters speaks to deeper ideological alignment among Americans, including the belief in educational equity. The very existence of a K-12 public educational system is a commitment to a fair shot for all students. We may disagree on whether the system accomplishes this goal, and we may disagree on whether this goal is within the necessary purview of federal government, but we can all agree on the principle of childhood literacy because we first agree that safeguarding the rights of all young people to learn can only strengthen our society.”<sup>29</sup>

And the federal government is showing its support for literacy development through the ESSER funding available via the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan Act. With agreement on the importance of literacy and unprecedented funding available to support it, the time to act is NOW.<sup>30</sup>

#### **DR. CYNTHIA ALEXANDER MITCHELL**

For the past 25 years, Dr. Mitchell's roles have ranged from teacher to Assistant Superintendent. Currently, she serves as Graduate Director and Associate Professor of Leadership at Christian Brothers University Department of Education. She was honored to receive National, State, and Local awards for student achievement, inclusive leadership and establishing cultural and equitable practices in leadership recognized nationally. Dr. Mitchell is also credited with successfully managing apx. 700 school and district partnerships for the 25th largest school district in the US. Dr. Mitchell currently serves as a governing board member for the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) under the auspices of SRI International sponsored by the United States Department of Education.

Ultimately, she has an unwavering commitment to assist in creating the best teaching and learning environments for all students. This has fueled her passion for exploring innovative approaches that will change the trajectory of P-20 education.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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There is no denying that we are in a state of educational emergency. According to a study published by Stanford University, the very fact that reading proficiency has fallen to a mere 30% means that 70% of students remain off track. Reflecting beyond surface data, a greater alarm is triggered by the double-digit drops among Black and Latino students.

As an educator, teacher, principal and educational leader, my initial conversations concerning student achievement are focused on the foundational stages of teaching reading, knowing that literacy proficiency is the major predictor of future success. We all understand that reading is the gatekeeper to future success.

Providing paths and opportunities for success in literacy is the key to raising proficiency and graduation rates for all students regardless of their background. Educators are tasked with closing opportunity gaps and must have the necessary resources to actively support the success of all students.

To actively engage struggling students and make reading gains, I decided on the very best research and instructional resources to support proficiency acquisition. The educational materials were not limited to the tradition textbook alone.

### **These resources and paths are most effective when they:**

- **provide relevant and relatable resources**
- **create a personalized learning path**
- **foster access to at-home libraries and resources for students and parents**

Expansive research validates that equitable access to books promotes reading achievement and student motivation. The NCTE issued the following statement on classroom libraries: “All students must be able to access, use, and evaluate information in order to meet the needs and education of the twenty-first century. These abilities are a necessary precursor to a sound education and healthy democracy...A large body of research demonstrates that equitable access to books promotes reading achievement and motivation,” (Allington, 2002, 2009; Krashen, 2011; Nystrand, 2006; Wu & Samuels, 2004). This accessibility is inclusive of the availability of both classroom libraries and take-home books. Beyond motivating students these resources encouraged voluntary and recreational reading, while developing literacy skills.

From my personal experience as a principal and educational leader, classrooms libraries and take-home materials provide students access to a variety reading materials that reflect their interests through self-selection, peeking their curiosity and love for reading. There is also a noticeably strengthened parent-to-educator relationship that deeply supports the students and families. Finally, the opportunities I observed when additional resources were provided was that these materials promoted social-emotional learning and academic success. Moreover, each child read not only on grade level but displayed sustainable growth over time.

## OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE LITERACY

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- **Use ESSER funding to provide quality, robust classroom library materials to all students**
- **Establish a schedule of books-to-home deliveries to keep kids engaged with reading particularly during school breaks**
- **Provide professional development to staff to ensure reading is being taught and assessed properly, and emphasize the importance of staff providing independent reading time and allowing student choice of materials**

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