Celebrating Literacy Leaders

- Meet David Wilkie and the rest of our ILA award winners
- Embracing your role: The changing scope of literacy leadership
- Top 5 highlights from Orlando
Nominate up-and-coming literacy leaders—people who transform the classroom, the community, or the world—for ILA’s next 30 Under 30 list, and help us share their dynamic stories.

TO FIND OUT HOW, VISIT:
literacyworldwide.org/30under30
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All educators are literacy leaders—and that’s a core belief that ILA has long held and promoted. You might not always realize it, but whether you foster students’ growth in the classroom, mentor your fellow teachers, or lead from an administrative perspective, you are leaders with extraordinary potential to shape the next generation and to build collaborative school cultures based on a foundation of literacy.

In our last issue’s cover story, we dug into the idea of how to build that foundation and ensure that literacy connections are prevalent among all teachers, across content areas. This issue carries on that theme, starting with “The PD Next Door” on page 18, which examines what can happen when teachers observe and learn from each other. We also look at how one middle school created a literacy committee to empower teachers across disciplines to work together in creating a literacy culture, explore the increasingly valued leadership role of reading specialists, and detail how elementary school principals are uniquely positioned to ensure quality literacy instruction is present in every classroom.

And with each article—including “Celebrating Literacy Leaders,” our awards cover story on page 26—we come back to the idea of recognizing all educators as literacy leaders. Read about our ILA 2017 award recipients, from rising stars to long-standing legends, and help us celebrate their incredible contributions to the field. They represent just a sampling of the amazing work being done to advance literacy worldwide, and we thank them—and you.

Warmly,

Colleen Patrice Clark
Managing Editor
cclark@reading.org

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Too Important to Miss

Investigative reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones led a diverse panel at the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits in a discussion on racism, implicit bias, and the importance of literacy for driving social change. If you missed this powerful session, you can read blog coverage at literacyworldwide.org/ILA17panel, or view the entire recorded discussion on our Facebook page at facebook.com/InternationalLiteracyAssociation/videos.

ILA Hosts Local Literacy Thought-Exchange

ILA convened a group of Delaware and Maryland school administrators and educators during their summer break to have a frank discussion about what their needs are when it comes to creating a culture of literacy. The conversation focused largely on insufficient funding, staffing, and resources as well as barriers to reaching students and an overreliance on standardized test scores. To read our blog coverage, visit literacyworldwide.org/thought-exchange.

Read, Eat, and Discover

ILA’s Missouri State Council and St. Louis Suburban Council, through our Read, Eat, and Discover (READ) partnership with the National Title I Association, donated 1,000 books to the students at the Leyendo con la Familia summer program at Confluence Academy, a charter school in Missouri. Many parents walk their children to the school, where breakfast is served. On this morning, parents were invited to stay and read to their children.
ILA’s latest literacy leadership brief, *Overcoming the Digital Divide: Four Critical Steps*, was released in August. The piece explores the limits of a digitally driven future when such a large usage and knowledge gap exists between the “haves and have-nots,” and it offers actionable steps that can be taken to advance equity for all. Another brief will be released later this month. *Early Literacy Learning for Immigrant and Refugee Children: Parents’ Critical Roles* will examine cultural models of learning and why it’s important to maintain a first language as EL students learn to read and write. Download them both at literacyworldwide.org/position-statements.

**Titles With a Hook**

We were recently asked on Twitter for YA book recommendations, particularly ones that would interest male readers. We put the question to our Twitter followers and received a fantastic list. Here is just a sample:

- *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (Atheneum)
- *The Berlin Boxing Club* by Robert Sharenow (Balzer & Bray)
- *Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby (Balzer & Bray)
- *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman (HarperTeen)
- *Drums, Girls, and Dangerous Pie* by Jordan Sonnenblick (Scholastic)
- *Forged by Fire* by Sharon M. Draper (Simon Pulse)
- *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini (Miramax)
- *The Last Exit to Normal* by Michael Harmon (Laurel Leaf)
- *Miles Morales: Spider-Man* by Jason Reynolds (Marvel)
- *Miracle’s Boys* by Jacqueline Woodson (Speak)
- *On the Edge of Survival* by Spike Walker (St. Martin’s Press)
- *Orbiting Jupiter* by Gary D. Schmidt (HMH) *(Also a 2016 ILA Young Adults’ Choices selection)*
- *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker (Balzer & Bray)
- *The Seeds of America Trilogy* by Laurie Halse Anderson (Atheneum)
- *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner (Ember) *(Also a 2017 ILA Young Adults’ Choices selection)*
- *Solo* by Kwame Alexander and Mary Rand Hess (Blink)
- *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien (Mariner)
- *The Unwind Dystology* by Neal Shusterman (Simon & Schuster)
- *Wilder Boys* by Brandon Wallace (Aladdin)
- *Winger* by Andrew Smith (Simon & Schuster)

Be sure to follow @ILAToday so you don’t miss out on the resources shared every day.

**Wanted: Rising Literacy Stars**

The nomination period for our next 30 Under 30 list is open! Help us show the world who our future literacy leaders are by submitting a nomination at literacyworldwide.org/30under30. Nominations must be received by June 1, 2018. In the meantime, read about what some of last year’s honorees have been up to on page 14.
It’s been nearly three years since the International Reading Association became the International Literacy Association (ILA), but the transition continues. As part of our commitment to growing and strengthening the organization, we have been examining every offering and activity to ensure it is of the highest quality, greatest value, and maximum impact.

And that is why, at the recent ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits, ILA Board members and staff met to discuss important changes to the entire ILA Literacy Leaders Awards program. These awards—some of which have been given out for the past 40-plus years—are one way for ILA to honor the work of our members, dedicated literacy professionals making significant contributions in the classroom, community, and field.

Decisions were made at the ILA 2017 meeting, but the work of reinvigorating the awards program began several months ago.

A dedicated task force, chaired by P. David Pearson, took a long, hard look at the existing recognition opportunities, of which there were nearly 30. Did they reflect our mission? Did they shine a light on the full spectrum of literacy professionals? Did they provide the kind of visibility that will allow us to achieve our goal of elevating the teaching profession?

One of the task force’s responsibilities was to see if there were any awards that were no longer serving our community or attracting great enough interest from applicants. In some cases, this led to discontinuing an award or combining two awards into one. Some names and descriptions were edited to best reflect the intent of an honor.

Next, we began drafting a list of what we thought was missing from the program. We talked about ways to increase member engagement in the process. We identified new avenues for recognizing our membership at the highest level of professionalism.

You’ll see the fruits of these efforts in this year’s slate of awards, the nominations for which opened in August, at literacyworldwide.org/about-us/awards-grants. In our cover story on page 26, you’ll also meet David Wilkie, the first-ever recipient of the Corwin Literacy Leader Award presented by ILA, and learn about the work he does as principal of McVey Elementary School in Newark, DE.

I’m proud of the work we’ve done and continue to do. A more focused awards program—one that accurately reflects the mission of ILA—allows us to raise the visibility of ILA award winners. Our hope is that by sharing their work through increased efforts, we will reach a wider audience and, in turn, help inform and inspire a greater number of literacy champions.

Revamping the ILA Literacy Leaders Awards program is but one important step the organization is taking to enhance opportunities for professional recognition. In the coming months, you’ll learn more about some additional initiatives that are equally exciting.

As always, we appreciate your feedback. So don’t hesitate to send us your thoughts!
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If you couldn’t join us for the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits, we hope you followed along on Twitter, where the chatter, excitement, and sharing of knowledge and resources was nonstop during that third weekend in July. Get caught up by checking out the #ILA17 hashtag, and be sure to view the provocative discussion from our equity in education panel—Disrupting a Destructive Cycle: How Literacy Drives Social Change—which can be found on our Facebook video section (facebook.com/InternationalLiteracyAssociation/videos).

In the meantime, check out some of the photos that stood out to us when it comes to representing the ILA experience and what you might have missed. (And mark your calendars now for the ILA 2018 Conference & Exhibits, July 21–23, in Austin, TX!)
The networking opportunities

An attendee at the ILA Meet & Eat Networking Lunch snaps a photo with General Session speaker Precious Symonette.

The sharing, both on social media and in real life
The abundant resources

The encouragement to step out of your comfort zone

Above and at top, conference-goers follow along with General Session speaker Enrique Feldman’s brain games.
n a Sunday afternoon in a room with a 5-year-old, 7-year-old, and 28-year-old, the thirst for literacy shined. All three were situated on the couch, each with a book of their choosing. All were deep within their stories, imagining different lives through characters and settings beyond their experiences.

A 2-year-old from another room noticed everyone reading and jumped up from playing with his trains to join the adventure. He eagerly plucked a book from the shelf and found a cozy spot on a chair. He grabbed a pillow and, as he began to settle down, exclaimed, “I’m going to read, too!” The other readers looked up to smile and then quickly returned to their stories.

ILA 2017’s Closing General Session speaker reflects on a literacy educator’s responsibility to be a changemaker in the classroom

By Kathryn Lett

IGNITING THE FLAME

Kathryn Lett (kathryn.lett@kentwoodps.org), an ILA member since 2016, is an EL teacher at Kentwood Public Schools in Michigan, a district with a large immigrant and refugee population. A 2016 ILA 30 Under 30 honoree, she also serves on the board of the West Michigan Refugee Education and Cultural Center and of the Michigan Reading Association as chair of International Projects.
The boy cracked open his book and began to peruse the words and illustrations, gliding his finger over the words and across the images. A few minutes passed until he announced with a laugh, “Huh...I can't read!” The boy then asked the 28-year-old, his nanny, for help, and she excitedly obliged. As the story was read aloud, the other readers paused in their stories to join an adventure to be shared together.

The boy in this scenario showed eagerness in reading. He knew he wanted to get his hands on books, but there was just one problem for him: He couldn’t read the story yet. He had a sincere desire to read just as he had seen modeled for him by his older brother and sister. He had piles of books at his fingertips, but he had yet to unlock the code.

Yet is the word just before change. If we as educators notice the yet, we can inspire change. The 2-year-old in this scenario had a dream to read, and the 28-year-old—full disclosure: It was me—had the desire to support others in the pursuit of their dreams. I knew I could ignite the boy’s spark for literacy, or I could extinguish it. I knew my role in his life could and should not be taken lightly. I held the key that he so desperately wanted and deserved to hold himself: literacy.

If not you, then who?

Books take us places. I may never fly with dragons or swim with sharks, but I can read about those experiences and feel like I have. The words and images in books transport us to lands to which we have never been with a simple turn of a page. The worlds we can unlock through books are endless. Literacy is the key, and literacy for all is the goal. Literacy for the young and the old, the shy and the bold, the near and the far. It isn’t just for those easy to teach, but especially for those just beyond reach.

Promoting and facilitating literacy is difficult. As literacy advocates, we have one of the most exhausting callings. It’s exhaustingly difficult because it’s imperative. If not you, then who? How do we get our students from where they are now to where they need to be?

First, we must seek out the answer to this question: Where do our students come from? If we do not know where our students come from, how can we expect to lead them to where they’re going? Literacy starts in the home. What barriers are standing in the way of your students experiencing literacy in their homes? What can we as educators and literacy advocates do to ensure literacy for all?

Ask why and how

Why aren’t these students reading at home? Do they have books? Are their parents working multiple jobs and unable to be at home to read to them? Are they speaking more than one language at home? Asking why reveals the barriers our students face. Asking why removes the pointed finger and creates a partnership between home and school. Once the barriers are uncovered, we can work to help our students and their families overcome them.

Can you imagine going to school to learn to read as your stomach rumbles and your toes peep through your too-small, hand-me-down shoes? Can you imagine trying to read a book written in your second language and not knowing what a blizzard or a drum set is? Can you imagine having the answers to questions in your native language but being unable to express yourself in English as your teacher requests? Can you imagine leaving your home behind to begin a new life in a new country with a completely new language?

Maybe you can. I couldn’t, and that’s why I needed to ask why and how. I needed to get to know my students and their needs to support them in their path toward bilingual literacy. I needed to get students shoes that fit before I expected them to read to me. I needed to give them rides to school activities to show them they’re welcome in their new place. I needed to make home visits to ensure their cupboards were stocked and, if they weren’t, work to fill them.

The world we live in today is not the same world we grew up in. Our job as literacy advocates isn’t just to teach and inspire students to read, but also to empower our students to become their best selves. We have a duty to implore our students to see and know their worth. Our students are worthy of educators who see them, know them, and love them. They deserve more. Just as our communities evolve, so should our literacy practices. Have the courage to ask why, reveal the barriers, and work to solve the problems standing between your students and their literacy growth.

You have the opportunity to ignite a spark or extinguish it. Which will you choose?
A lot has happened since last September when ILA announced its 2016 class of 30 Under 30 honorees, a list that celebrates the up-and-coming generation of literacy champions. After hearing from Kathryn Lett at the Closing General Session of the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits (and in her article on page 12), we also wanted to check in with her fellow honorees to see what they’ve been up to.

Read on to see how some of their lives have changed and how they continued to change the lives of so many others in just the past year.

- Babar Ali, founder and headmaster of Ananda Siksha Niketan in Murshidabad, India, announced that the first floor of his new, free school was constructed in early 2017, enabling even more students to enroll. Students also are taking part in a social forestry program to promote awareness of deforestation, and students are working with an adult literacy program to spread learning wider in the community.

- Seventh-grade English teacher Alex Corbitt developed and facilitated a Teen Activism class at his school, MS331 in the Bronx, New York, that used current events to focus on social justice issues such as the prison industrial complex, racism, mental health, substance abuse, and bullying. “The 2016–2017 school year was fraught with sociopolitical tragedy and confusion,” he says. “Our Teen Activism class created a space for my students and me to reflect, process, listen, and heal.”

- For Tanyella Evans, cofounder/CEO of New York-based Library For All, the last year has seen close to 10,000 children from 50 schools in Haiti, Rwanda, Congo, Cambodia, and Mongolia get free access to their online library, which now includes 3,806 titles in seven languages. While creating the library, the group discovered a surprising gap: As many as 40% of people around the world are not learning to read a language they speak or understand. In response, Library For All launched writer workshops to teach local authors and illustrators how to publish e-books in their native language.

- Since last year, Jeff Fonda’s nonprofit, The Literate Earth Project, has opened three more libraries in Uganda: at Lwani Memorial College in Amuru District, Nkumba Quran Primary School in Entebbe District, and St. James Primary School in Entebbe District. The project, based in Pennsylvania, has now created 13 libraries and is on target to meet its goal of creating four each year.

- In Brazil, Gustavo Fuga’s 4You2 social program continues to teach English to help people access higher education and have the potential to earn an additional 64% in wages. This spring, the group further honed its teaching tools and methodology. “We would like to launch a literacy project for papers and research this year,” he says.

- Anneli Hershman, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology doctoral student, reports that her literacy app development team completed an extensive research pilot with families using their SpeechBlocks app. “It has been really exciting to see how we can incorporate families into the literacy learning process with our tools,” she says. The group is also researching the literacy learning process and creating new apps that emphasize the importance of storytelling and self-expression to encourage literacy.

- Kathryn Lett, an EL teacher with Kentwood Public Schools in Michigan, says the school held its second annual Parade of Nations and multicultural night, where each class prepared presentations, games, and decor that focused on a country belonging to one of the classmates. “It was amazing to see my school come together for one common goal: to celebrate diversity as our strength and to eradicate the idea that differences equal deficits,” says Lett, who serves on the board of the West Michigan Refugee Education and Cultural Center. Lett also began...
developing a literacy initiative to better equip non–English-speaking parents with the skills they need to help their children learn to read. Parents will be provided with comprehension questions in their native languages so they can provide literacy support in the home.

- The LitPick Student Book Reviews program continues to attract even more students to write reviews for the website, says administrator Tynea Lewis, who is based in Pennsylvania. Some students have turned their reviews into animated videos that are shown on the organization’s YouTube channel. She also has been volunteering as a judge for Story Monsters LLC’s Dragonfly Book Awards. She adds, “I have completed a few children’s poetry manuscripts and am currently working on a larger project for an adult audience.”

- Sean T. Lynch, English department head for the Commonwealth Academy for Inner City Scholars in Massachusetts, is taking the gaming model he created to help with reading skills and developing it into other areas that involve game-based teaching practices and student-directed learning. He is creating an experimental curriculum for the ELA classroom that uses narrative and text-based cell phone apps to get kids hooked. “I used the app ‘A Normal Lost Phone’ to great success in class,” he says. “It got students reading, instructed on social justice, and produced thoughtful responses.”

- Aarti Naik, founder of SAKHI for Girls’ Education in Mumbai, India, says her group has continued to expand its Girls Book Bank project, in which adolescent girls become “Reading Leaders” for their neighborhood. Each Sunday, they go door-to-door to give books to 20 girls and gather them together in fun activities to inspire reading, improve vocabulary, and build confidence. They also receive a monthly educational scholarship. Naik was recognized for her work in the education category of the Femina Women Awards 2017.

- Deborah Ahenkorah Osei-Agyekum was pleased to report that her Ghana-based African Bureau Stories has produced its first books: two picture books and two early chapter books created by talented writers and illustrators from Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria to reflect the worlds of their young readers. “I’m launching a project to partner with companies to place brand new, culturally relevant storybooks into the hands of children across Ghana, one classroom at a time,” she says.

- Ekaterina Popova, educator and researcher in Moscow, Russia, has been busy as secretary of the Reading Association of Russia with attracting new members. She helped launch a new e-mail-based digest that outlines best practices in reading and literacy, the Association’s research results, and new opportunities for members. In addition to developing a survey and processing data from the group’s longitudinal “Reading That Unites Us” research project (featured in the May/June 2017 issue of Literacy Today), she helped design a new project with colleagues called “Dialogue of Generations: Reading, Communication, and Social Behaviour.” The mission is to search for books and movies that create a unifying cultural platform that is significant for several generations.

- Matt Presser, formerly a teacher at King-Robinson Inter-District Magnet School in Connecticut and now a doctoral student at Harvard University, designed a pen pal project between incarcerated teens and tenth graders he was working with in Boston. “My students were concerned about the effects of mass incarceration and wrote back and forth with incarcerated teens to understand their experiences,” he says. “Their correspondence project had deep impact. It inspired my students to write to Boston Public Schools officials with recommended alternatives to suspension and to New York City teenagers to encourage them to lobby their state legislators about the Raise the Age legislation.”

- Kelly Taylor, a teacher at Peel Language Development School in Perth, Australia, embarked on an action research project to collect evidence around using the arts as a pedagogical approach to teaching literacy in a special education context. “Specifically, I’m looking at how all aspects of the arts can be used to elicit and extend students’ vocabulary,” she says. She hopes the study will contribute to existing evidence that all students, regardless of their abilities and challenges, should be entitled to a learning environment rich in the arts. As a speaker at the ILA 2017 Conference, she shared strategies for empowering students with language delays.

- Arcadia Elementary School literacy coach Melissa Wells reports that she and her South Carolina school continue to focus on family members as vital partners in students’ literacy development. The library now has a Family Literacy Center that lets families check out bundles of books to read at home. In addition, Wells finished her dissertation and earned a doctorate in language and literacy from the University of South Carolina. “In the fall, I will be joining the education department faculty at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, VA, where my focus will be on early literacy,” she says. “I am excited to be working with our newest educators as they prepare to support students as readers, writers, and thinkers in their future classrooms.” Wells also presented her dissertation research at ILA 2017.

For more information on the entire 2016 class of 30 Under 30 honorees, as well as the 2015 list, visit literacyworldwide.org/30under30.

**NOMINATIONS ARE OPEN!**

Do you know a literacy advocate making an extraordinary impact in the lives of students and others? Nominations for the next 30 Under 30 list, to be published in January 2019, are open. Submissions must be received by June 1, 2018. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org/30under30.
Do you have a minute? Of course not. That’s why at Corwin Literacy we have put together a collection of just-in-time, classroom-tested, practical resources from trusted experts that allow you to quickly find the information you need when you need it.

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mazing professional learning opportunities are all around us. Workshops and conferences are rich resources for learning from highly respected speakers, researchers, and authors. Social media drives learning by connecting us with educators around the world through Twitter, Facebook, Voxer, and countless other tools. Learning for teachers today is often no more than the click of a button away.

What teachers might be surprised by, though, is the rich opportunity to learn from those closest to us.

For the past six years, I have served as a mentor teacher in my building, providing professional development and coaching first-year teachers. This role put me in an ideal position to share ideas I had gleaned from conferences and professional literature during my time in the classroom. I stepped away from being a fourth-grade teacher feeling confident in my knowledge of literacy and fully prepared to embrace my new responsibility as a leader in professional development.

What I quickly learned, however, was that I was the real learner. Each time I visited a classroom, whether it belonged to a new teacher or a veteran, I gained fresh ideas, new techniques, and a shift in perspective. I was pushed over and over to evaluate my own educational beliefs and how they impacted my practice.

Although the merits of professional development from outside the walls of our schools are indisputable, my time as a coach taught me that some of the best learning opportunities are as close as the classroom next door. When we set aside time to observe teachers engaging with the same student population, the same reading and writing curriculum, and the same resources, there is much to learn from their unique talents and teaching strategies.

All it takes to make this learning happen in our schools are strong relationships, a clear focus, and collaboration.

Setting the stage

The foundation of learning from colleagues within our own schools lies in creating a positive experience for both the classroom teacher and the observer. This type of relationship must be built on strong communication and trust.

Every time I went into a classroom, it was essential for me to be transparent with the teacher. We were engaged in a process of learning together, and this goal could be accomplished only by keeping the focus on student learning and being clear about what and why I wanted to observe.

Each teacher also needed to understand that I was not there to judge. I was not evaluating them, and my observations were always confidential. While I frequently observed practices that closely aligned with my own philosophies and sparked amazing new ideas, I also occasionally experienced teaching that I would not replicate in my practices. Regardless, I found it crucial to share a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the teacher, supported by my commitment to keeping my observations private. This trust led teachers to welcome my presence and set the stage for a strong learning opportunity for us both.
Observing with intention
When I first started visiting other classrooms, I simply went in and observed everything I could see—room setup, instruction, interactions with students, and so on. Although I did learn and grow from these experiences, I never felt I was truly focused. I quickly discovered the necessity of visiting with intention. Both the classroom teacher and I needed the observation driven by why: Why do I want to observe in this classroom? I found that setting an intention was the best way to focus. This was easily accomplished by gathering data: counts of positive, neutral, and negative interactions with students to explore teacher/student interactions; records of time spent on each component of a reading/writing minilesson to track lesson pacing; and examinations of recorded lessons to look closely at a teacher’s verbal and nonverbal communication.

Observing in other classrooms is most impactful and intentional when driven by a few key questions: What is my purpose in observing? What do I want to learn? How might I document or collect data? Answering these questions ahead of time, either alone or in collaboration with the classroom teacher, keeps the observation focused and creates a strong learning opportunity.

Learning together
While observing alone is a transformative experience, visiting classrooms within your own school alongside colleagues poses an even more amazing learning opportunity. This past year, my colleagues and I participated in an adapted model of lesson study. Driven by our building leadership team, teachers in grades K–5 used quarterly release time to visit a selected classroom at their own grade level while the classroom teacher was engaged in reading or writing instruction. Following the lesson, the focus teacher and team gathered to reflect by sharing feedback, exchanging ideas, and discussing future teaching plans.

This practice was beneficial for each educator involved and brought to the forefront a realization of how infrequently we get to truly observe our peers teach. Not only did teachers get to walk away with new ideas and strategies for instruction, but the experience also affirmed many of the strong practices that were already happening throughout our school.

Over the course of the year, we all gained confidence, became more collaborative, and were more open to the experience of inviting others to watch us teach.

Moving forward
This fall, I am excited to return to the classroom and to a new group of students. As I go back from my time on the “outside,” my heart is filled with gratitude to all the teachers who allowed me to learn from them, excitement as I make plans to implement new ideas and strategies I’ve gained from this experience, and encouragement for all teachers to take a close look at the learning they can experience by spending a few moments in the classroom next door.
In 2013, our principal at Jefferson Middle School (JMS) in Missouri, Gregery Caine, approached a group of teachers with the idea to create a literacy committee. He was inspired by Susan Szachowicz’s work in turning Brockton High School in Massachusetts from a failing school into one where literacy is valued and nurtured. Caine looked to teachers for leadership. His exact words were, “You’re the literacy experts. I trust you.”

Common language, common goals
Since our inception, the literacy committee has been composed of a variety of content teachers. Our core committee stresses that everyone is a member and is welcome to give input at any time. Stressing whole-faculty input started from day one and grew out of necessity. Teachers in differing areas use a variety of standards and curriculum. How could we address literacy as a school if we weren’t even sure how each teacher defined literacy?
We started by asking teachers to share their standards. Our EL teachers brought the WIDA standards. Our AVID teachers brought WICOR. Teachers who used Common Core brought those standards. Our elective teachers brought their standards.

At the center of our work was one guiding question: What literacy skills do our students need by the time they leave our building?

Over the course of a semester, we looked for similarities and tweaked what we as a staff thought literacy should look like. The committee held focus groups to help teachers prioritize and come to a consensus about our vision. We emphasized one point: We are in this together.

By the end of the semester, Literacy at JMS was ready for the printing press. We purchased posters to hang in every classroom to ensure we shared a common language and could articulate our common vision.

Every teacher is a literacy leader
Immediately, we began to see the fruits of our committee’s core belief that every teacher is a literacy leader. After consulting with our data committee and our leadership team about priorities for student improvement, we chose a building-wide focus: writing constructed response answers, a key component of our state test. While the literacy committee took the leadership role in creating model lessons to teach constructed response writing, we once again asked our teachers to be leaders by sharing writing strategies that worked within their content. We worked toward consensus until we crafted Six Cyclone Steps to Constructed Response and a common rubric for scoring.

At faculty meetings, we continue to train together. Teachers’ growing confidence in providing literacy leadership is seen in our classrooms as well. Math teachers asked to add Six Cyclone Steps to Reading a Graph and science teachers asked to add Science Terms to Know to our poster collections. But these aren’t just wall hangings. Committee cochair and sixth-grade English teacher Misha Fugit explains, “When I teach a lesson containing a Graph of the Week as our class text, using the same language as our science and math teachers helps to reinforce the literacy skills students have learned in those classes.”

Celebrating literacy
By taking steps to keep literacy positive, we make sure the committee does not become seen as the “constructed response police.” We stress that constructed response writing can be as informal as a quick-write or as formal as a test question, but that the data teachers collect should always help guide their instruction and give us insight into our students’ literacy needs and our staff training needs.

One initiative does not make a culture, so we strive to find ways to celebrate literacy throughout the year. In our four years of building a literacy culture, we have created opportunities to celebrate all readers, writers, and thinkers, such as:

- Building-wide One Reads, including R.J. Palacio’s Wonder (Knopf) and Sharon Draper’s Out of My Mind (Atheneum)
- Grant writing to bring Jason Reynolds and K.A. Holt to our school
- “Ask Me What I’m Reading” posters
- Celebrations for Global Read Aloud and World Read Aloud Day
- Maintenance of a mobile library to support weekly sustained silent reading in advisory classes
- FREADOM T-shirts to celebrate Banned Book Week and summer reading T-shirts
- JMS@DBRL, where teachers spend summer hours at the library to meet with families

Assessing our impact
When Caine invited us to begin this journey, one of our goals was better test scores. In monitoring and using our constructed response data, our committee and staff felt we were on the right track. We could see students becoming better writers. We could hear teachers of all content areas becoming better teachers of writing as they collaborated in PLCs, grade-level teams, and partnerships.

Comparing our 2015–2016 state test scores with our 2016–2017 scores, we found validation. Our school had several points of improvement. Most impressive, we reached our goal of raising science scores on our state test by 10%.

We celebrate these improvements and we know there is still more to do to ensure our students internalize the love of literacy. Our ultimate goal goes far beyond test scores. In assessing our culture—where we are and where we want to be—we know our work has the potential to impact the literacy lives of our students and staff far into the future.
Last semester, I worked closely with an enthusiastic group of reading specialist candidates enrolled in a required course titled Literacy Leadership. The course, grounded in readings, discussions, and experiences, aims to shift candidates’ thinking toward fulfilling a literacy leadership role in the schools where they do, or someday will, teach.

Collaborating with colleagues, administrators, and parents is a central focus of the course. While teaching this past spring, I received the March/April 2017 issue of *Literacy Today*, and dove right into “Setting the Example: What Happens When Principals Make Literacy the Foundation of All Learning.” My first reaction was to applaud the three principals profiled. Through example, their actions confirmed much of what has emerged from research on the important role school principals play in developing and nurturing a culture of shared literacy leadership.

My second connection to the piece focused on how reading specialists may recognize, accept, and even advocate for leadership opportunities in their schools. In my current role, I facilitate my students’ paths toward leadership roles, yet early on in my career, I nearly missed a literacy leadership opportunity that was right under my nose.

The value of shared leadership

Eighteen years ago, I met with a well-respected principal of a K–4 urban school. I was a doctoral student assigned as a liaison to support and coach K–3 teachers. These teachers were voluntarily participating in a professional development initiative on early literacy. Although I had worked with the teachers during a weeklong summer institute and easily established rapport, I was very anxious about this first meeting with the principal.

In the office, we discussed topics including the grant’s content, purpose, outcomes, and my own role as site liaison/coach. I told the principal about my background, highlighting my advanced reading specialist certification. The principal questioned, “What can you tell me about word building and the research on decoding?” I confidently gave a summarizing response, as decoding was a focus of the initiative’s content, a major component of the summer institute, and a prominent element in my preparation as a reading specialist. After this meeting, I went back to my peers on campus, relayed the details of my meeting, and revisited the decoding question, wondering if the principal was interviewing me. Was he perhaps assessing and evaluating my knowledge before allowing me to work with his teachers?

A few months and a couple brief interactions later, the principal returned to the topic of decoding, this time anchoring his question around instruction. “How well do you think the teachers are doing with decoding instruction, and is there anything they should do differently?” he asked. I supported the teachers and provided specific examples of their high-quality instruction. Afterward, I went about my day’s work in the classrooms, but felt unsettled. Was he expecting me to observe, evaluate, and report back to him?
Around this time, I began to investigate and research the informal leadership responsibilities that some reading specialists were fulfilling. It was in the early 2000s when the reading specialist role itself was on the cusp of a major transformation, moving toward leadership responsibilities that are so widely accepted as the norm today. In fact, at the time of my initial coaching experience, the position statement (from what was then the International Reading Association, now ILA) highlighting the leadership responsibilities specialists may assume, *Teaching All Children to Read: The Roles of the Reading Specialist* (2000), was not yet published.

I went on to work at this school for the next three years, each year working with another cohort until the state grant ended. The principal and I developed a terrific working relationship and had multiple interactions like those described previously; the topics were always relevant to the literacy program and focused on the success of both the students and teachers.

Looking back, I can emphatically state that principal was not interviewing me, testing my knowledge, or asking me to evaluate the teachers, but instead he was trusting me to engage as a literacy leader in the school. The principal was inviting me to support the school’s literacy efforts. He valued my responses, respected my role as a reading specialist, and knew I was vested in the success of the school community. In other words, he understood the value of shared leadership and a collaborative culture.

Looking back—and ahead

Almost 20 years later, I am ecstatically hopeful for educators who pursue reading specialist certification. Simply, there is no better time to be a reading specialist. In addition to working in teaching, intervention, and assessment, opportunities exist to engage in collaborative literacy leadership.

For example, the candidates I worked with this past semester shared experiences of leading professional development efforts in oral language development, mentoring peers with disciplinary literacy efforts, advocating for development of a digital literacy technology plan, working closely with instructional coaches and school principals to analyze and disseminate student data, and evaluating their school’s literacy program goals. These candidates have accepted and assumed these responsibilities with knowledge and confidence.

Looking back almost 20 years ago, I was suspicious. I did not realize my potential or possibility for identifying and engaging in formal or informal leadership opportunities. This principal, however, did. Nonetheless, I am committed to doing my part to ensure future specialized literacy professionals (e.g., reading specialists, literacy coaches, interventionists, literacy coordinators) are informed and knowledgeable about literacy leadership roles and aware of the professional resources available for their own development, such as the many resources offered through the International Literacy Association.

With this, they will be positioned to craft and articulate their own literacy leadership trajectory—one in which they will serve schools, colleagues, and administrators while facilitating the success of the K–12 students with whom they work.
Typical educational leadership programs and professional development opportunities do not include development regarding literacy knowledge and trends, literacy coaching, or literacy leadership. Given the developmental range that exists in elementary-aged children, elementary principals are uniquely positioned to ensure quality literacy instruction occurs in classrooms.

For the past decade, elementary principals have faced increased scrutiny. Student performance regardless of student experiences, district funding, or societal factors has been the responsibility of the principal. Similarly, teachers have been ridiculed and scorned and the profession under attack. As a result, principals are left trying to create positive school culture, evaluate teacher performance, and guide and support professional development initiatives.

Here we provide three key principles for elementary administrators as they reclaim their role as the instructional leader in their building.

Principle 1: Create a culture of joy

With increased accountability, shrinking budgets, and more content to introduce with less time to introduce it, teachers, school leaders, and students may be finding it difficult to find the joy in teaching and learning. School leaders often feel pressure to meet standardized test benchmarks at the expense of allowing their teachers to experiment, take risks, and collaborate. In those cases, schools may be devoid of joy.

The principal has the responsibility of creating an environment where her or his vision encapsulates joy. Creating this culture may seem overwhelming because currently there is so little of it in our schools. We say we want teachers to differentiate and meet the needs of each student, but we don’t provide teachers with the time, space, and creative opportunities to do so. Instead, in many cases, teachers are told what to teach and how to teach.

Teachers know the purpose of their work; they have the professional knowledge to understand what is at stake when students are not successful, but they also need to have the autonomy to be creative. From an organizational and motivational theory perspective, when people have autonomy, they tend to be more committed and more productive. We would argue that this is true for teachers. For teachers who work in a culture of joy, there is a higher level of job satisfaction.
Principle 2: Develop literacy knowledge

As literacy leaders, there is an urgent need for literacy knowledge. There is an enormity of pressure on teachers to demonstrate student growth. To achieve that goal, it seems they are becoming more restricted in the way they choose to address it. It seems every year, teachers and administrators are bombarded with the latest and greatest packaged programs. Given the pressure they are under, teachers and administrators eagerly adopt these new programs to meet the needs of their students. Once adopted, they turn their focus toward implementing the prepackaged program with fidelity.

Regie Routman, in Read, Write, Lead: Breakthrough Strategies for Schoolwide Literacy Success (ASCD), points out that most school leaders in charge of literacy are often leaders who do not have a background in literacy instruction and even less in literacy leadership. This can create a void of skills when the school leader is charged with building and sustaining a culture that supports literacy instruction.

Literacy leaders have knowledge to ensure that teachers understand effective instruction, how to utilize literacy data, and how to measure student growth. The lack of literacy knowledge puts administrators in the awkward position of “policing.” These individuals ensure that teachers are not straying from the prescribed curriculum, have the manual in front of them, are teaching directly from the book, or proper documentation is hanging on the walls. Instead, a deeper sense of knowledge allows the literacy leader to give concrete feedback on how to improve instruction, motivate students, or take risks to try something different.

Principle 3: Strengthen your literacy leadership muscle

Principals are also mentors, coaches, and evaluators and therefore need to possess a strong knowledge base to adequately support teachers. The work of Daniel Pink expresses the need for professionals to experience autonomy in daily work so they can be more productive. Autonomy has been removed from the teacher, resulting in the deprofessionalization of the profession and undermining the classroom teacher’s ability to make the best instructional decisions to benefit students’ knowledge construction and their overall love of school and learning.

The principal has the responsibility to make the district’s instructional or student growth goals a reality by creating a vision that is aligned to the goals. Vision setting is not something principals are always asked to do. As a literacy leader, creating a clear vision with clear goals is important. Vision provides the clarity needed to support teachers and staff to ensure goals are accomplished.

Having a vision and communicating the vision in a clear and coherent way ensures unity of purpose, consistency of practice, and collegiality and collaboration. In Read, Write, Lead, Routman highlights the need for a school to have common beliefs for literacy. Those core beliefs are used to drive the instructional decisions made when determining curriculum and materials. Without a set of shared core beliefs tied to the vision, teachers lose focus and what may look like autonomy may in fact be confusion, causing teachers to make their own decisions without a framework to guide them. Without a framework, the ability of a teacher to experience autonomy as well as a joyful learning environment may be significantly compromised.

The impact on student success

The role of principals has shifted. As they guide and support teachers, they need to recognize that teachers in many ways do not see themselves as professionals, do not feel that they have autonomy in their classrooms, and may not have the same joy that they once had.

It may sound silly, but autonomous teachers will become joyful teachers. Joyful teachers result in happier, more productive, engaged learners, and high-achieving students.
CELEBRATING LITERACY LEADERS

ILA’s awards program recognizes both rising stars and lifetime contributions

By Alina O’Donnell

This year’s ILA Literacy Leaders Awards recipients come from a diverse range of backgrounds, ages, and areas of expertise—and all are working alongside us to reimagine literacy.

Recipients include new voices, such as 23-year-old Marique Daugherty, who launched not one, but two successful literacy programs in an urban community in Jamaica, as well as veteran scholars such as John Guthrie, the first research director of what was then the International Reading Association (now ILA). Their footprints on the global literacy landscape show us how far we have come and where we are heading.

From research and advocacy to educating and training, these literacy champions are serving on all fronts to help us reach our goal of literacy for all.
David Wilkie, principal at McVey Elementary School, Newark, Delaware

Wilkie is the recipient of the inaugural Corwin Literacy Leader Award presented by ILA, which honors a district or school administrative literacy leader who has worked to increase student literacy achievement by advancing professional development, instructional resources support, and the development of literacy programs.

At McVey Elementary School, books are everywhere. They are hidden under desks as students read surreptitiously during class, displayed on decorative bulletin boards in the hallways, tumbling out of lockers, and even strewn throughout the cafeteria, having strayed from the “borrow and return” pile.

But it hasn’t always been this way. “We knew that we had to change what literacy looked like at McVey. Our students did not show a love of reading and writing—they saw it more as a chore,” says principal David Wilkie.

McVey’s literacy transformation began in April 2016 when ILA received a grant from an anonymous donor as part of the Delaware Community Foundation’s Fund for Children’s Literacy. The grant was to be used at a public elementary school in Delaware to build a culture of literacy through professional learning opportunities for staff, schoolwide reading programs, and family engagement.

ILA chose to use the funds at McVey on the basis of the school’s history of high staff retention and strong leadership. In its first year, ILA focused on professional development; the grant covered the cost of Wilkie and seven other staff members and teachers to attend the ILA 2016 Conference & Exhibits in Boston, MA.

“Most of us had never attended an ILA conference before. We didn’t really know what we were walking into,” says Wilkie. “We were reenergized; we came back with so many ideas. We met as a team every night at dinner. Our dinners were about two to three hours long because we were sharing information and talking about what we could do at McVey.”

The group decided that the theme of the school’s literacy makeover would be “wonder.” “We felt that our students had lost that sense of wonder at an early age,” says Wilkie. “They were all about asking questions in the early years, but by third grade, they start losing that.”

The once-plain walls at McVey are now vibrant “wonder walls” covered in questions—some content related, some general—written by students. Every “Wonder Wednesday,” the questions are read aloud and answered by teachers, students, or Wilkie during morning announcements. Wilkie says plans for “wonder centers” and “wonder windows” are in the works.

Over the past year, ILA and McVey have collaborated on a series of initiatives to help build a culture of literacy at the school. The grant also covered support from Carriere Cummins, professor at Louisiana Tech University, who is working with Wilkie to identify the school’s main challenges and to establish a long-term plan. With her assistance, McVey has set up four professional development experiences related to interactive read-aloud training.

Wilkie believes that everyone at McVey—from the cafeteria servers to the P.E. teachers—needs to be involved in the project, excited by the mission, and committed to a set of shared goals.

“A big part of this is shifting the mind-sets of teachers from teaching stories to teaching a love of reading and the importance of reading,” he says.

Cummins helped to implement interactive read-alouds, independent reading time, and schoolwide and gradewide author and book studies. Last year, all the fifth graders read Bridge to Terabithia (HarperCollins), which culminated in a Skype session with author Katherine Paterson.

“One class took a survey about what they enjoyed this year that they hadn’t in the past, and the majority made comments like ‘Thank you for giving us more time to read books and to choose books we like to read,’” Wilkie says.

This year, 23 teachers and staff members attended the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits in Orlando, FL.

When asked about next steps, Wilkie says they are looking to get parents and the community more involved. Since starting the project, he says several parents have noticed a shift in their child’s attitude toward reading. One even said it’s a challenge to get her child to stop reading long enough to hold a conversation over dinner.

“He was always a reader but he wasn’t always this passionate about reading,” says Wilkie. “But now, he can’t put the books down.”

Submit a Nomination
For more information on ILA’s awards, including submission deadline information for 2018, visit literacyworldwide.org/about-us/awards-grants.
John Guthrie, Jean Mullan Professor of Literacy Emeritus in the Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology at the University of Maryland, College Park

Guthrie is the recipient of the William S. Gray Citation of Merit Award, recognizing a nationally or internationally known individual for his or her outstanding contributions to the field of reading/literacy.

John Guthrie has devoted his career to exploring what he believes is the “big, empty hole in human development for reading”—motivation.

He discovered this uncharted territory while serving as codirector of the National Reading Research Center, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

“The theme was motivation and engagement. We said, let’s shine a light on this topic that hasn’t gotten high awareness. What are motivators for students, and what kinds of classroom contexts and teacher practices boost motivation and engagement?” Guthrie recalls.

Guthrie’s research focuses on the positive relationship between reading motivation and literacy achievement. He says skill and will go hand in hand.

“If a student is relatively well motivated in several different ways, they then become engaged in reading. They’re putting out effort, following their passion for reading. Motivations drive effort, energy, and enjoyment,” Guthrie says.

Guthrie, who received both his master’s and doctoral degrees in educational psychology from the University of Illinois, began his career as an assistant professor of education and project director of the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. In addition to his stint at the National Reading Research Center, he has served as the director of research for what was then the International Reading Association and director of the Center for Educational Research and Development at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Although he retired in 2007, Guthrie is currently involved in four research projects examining motivation in digital literacy. Like the field itself, his research has evolved to reflect the increasing multimodality of 21st-century texts.

Guthrie says his research is helping to establish new tools in digital literacy engagement. Right now, he’s studying how computer systems can teach struggling readers in a way that’s motivationally adaptive (responds to the motivation of kids), helping teachers to develop practices that inspire a fuller range of motivations.

When asked how he feels about receiving ILA’s William S. Gray Citation of Merit, Guthrie says he is humbled to receive an award named after one of his idols.

“William S. Gray was my hero when I was working at ILA. He was one of my inspirations in terms of how he read and how he wrote and what he did,” Guthrie says. “It is a special honor to have this award linked to him.”

Laura Northrop, assistant professor of literacy education at Cleveland State University, Ohio

Northrop is the recipient of the Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award, honoring an exceptional dissertation completed in the field of reading or literacy.

Laura Northrop brings a former journalist’s mind-set to the field of literacy research, where she approaches each challenge like a news story, seeking a deeply contextualized understanding of the reader’s world.

After a brief stint in journalism, Northrop decided she wanted to go into education. Her first teaching job was in the Chicago public school district. Although she taught grades 6–8, most of her students were reading below a middle school level. During this time, she became increasingly interested in struggling readers, particularly in the middle school context, and she decided to pursue a PhD in education policy analysis from the University of Pittsburgh.

“I wanted to know, what’s the difference between children who enter kindergarten with low-level literacy skills and go on to have average achievement, and those who enter with low literacy skills and continue to struggle?” Northrop recalls. She explored this question in her dissertation, “Breaking the Cycle: Cumulative Disadvantage in Literacy.”

Northrop’s research focuses on teacher attrition, instructional practices, and cumulative disadvantage in literacy. She believes literacy success lies at the intersection of choice, parenting behaviors, and instructional intervention.

“It really is an alignment of child, home, and school factors. The child has to be motivated to want to be a better reader, the parents have to be on board, and teachers have to be knowledgeable enough to provide the right interventions at the right time,” says Northrop.
Peggy Semingson, professor of curriculum and instruction, The University of Texas at Arlington

Semingson is the recipient of the Jerry Johns Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award, which recognizes a long-standing commitment to engaging, student-centered teaching and support.

When it comes to online literacy education, Peggy Semingson has always been ahead of the trends. She started her blog, Literacy Update, in 2004, before the channel reached what it is today. She continues to share her literacy expertise on her podcast and YouTube channel, which recently hit one million minutes of viewings.

Semingson’s success in her online channels is proof of the power of self-directed learning tools, one of her research interests. “I asked myself, how do we empower students to do their own learning, their own self-directed learning?” she says.

Semingson first became interested in literacy studies while pursuing her doctorate in curriculum and instruction at the University of Texas at Austin. A lifelong reader and former philosophy major, she has an innate curiosity about the reading process.

Semingson’s research focuses on frameworks that support online literacy teacher education. She is especially interested in socially distributed knowledge in online spaces, distributed cognition, and video-mediated discussion and dialogue. Currently, she’s looking at how teachers can nurture online communities and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing.

Semingson believes the future of literacy teacher education will be more student centered. She celebrates open educational resources such as author blogs and media, videos and podcasts, free online journal articles, multimodal literacies, microlearning, and webinars that are making education accessible to a wider audience.

“The whole nature of what it means to be a teacher is rapidly changing. Students have information at their fingertips, and we need to help them facilitate their own learning,” she says.

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2017 AWARD RECIPIENTS

ILA recognized the achievements of all award winners during the ILA 2017 Conference & Exhibits in Orlando, FL. The list of recipients follows:

**Children’s and Young Adults’ Book Award**

**Primary Fiction**
Delivering Dreams by Lori Preusch (Dandelion)

**Primary Nonfiction**
Miss Coffax’s Light by Aimée Bissonette (Sleeping Bear)

**Intermediate Fiction**
Hour of the Bees by Lindsay Eagar (Candlewick)

**Intermediate Nonfiction**
The Distance Between Us (Young Readers Edition) by Reyna Grande (Aladdin)

**Young Adult Fiction**
The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner (Crown)

**Young Adult Nonfiction**
Trying to Float: Coming of Age in the Chelsea Hotel by Nicolaia Rips (Scribner)

**Dina Feitelson Research Award**
Lea M. McGee, Hwewon Kim, Kathryn S. Nelson, and Mary D. Fried, The Ohio State University, Dublin/Columbus, OH

**Elva Knight Research Grant**
Sabina Neugebauer, Loyola University, Chicago, IL

**Helen M. Robinson Grant**
Cassie Brownell, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

**Jeanne S. Chall Research Fellowship**
Christopher Wenz, University of Connecticut, Mansfield, CT

**Jerry Johns Outstanding Teacher Educator in Reading Award**
Peggy Semingson, Arlington, TX

**Outstanding Dissertation of the Year Award**
Laura Northrop, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH

**Regie Routman Teacher Recognition Grant**
Charito G. Haines Drezek, Schenectady, NY

**Maryann Manning Special Service Award**
Carmelita Williams, Norfolk, VA

**Steven A. Stahl Research Grant**
Miranda Fitzgerald, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

**Nila Banton Smith Teacher as Researcher Grant**
Sarah Valter, Jillian Skouby, and Katie Syrett, Sappington Elementary, Sappington, MO

**Technology and Literacy Award**

**Grand Recipient**
Marique Daugherty, Slough, United Kingdom

**Regional Recipients**
Brian Cook, Salisbury, MD
Patricia Daniels, Greenbrier, AR

**William S. Gray Citation of Merit**
John Guthrie, College Park, MD

**Corwin Literacy Leader Award presented by ILA**
David Wilkie, McVey Elementary School, Newark, DE
three-year-old Lainey bends low over her paper, carefully reading each mark as she writes:

“Little Red Riding Hood went in the forest. She didn’t know the wolf would come...was going to come. She only knew her mother told her in a serious voice, ‘Don’t go off the path! Don’t talk to strangers!’ Then she went into the deep, dark woods...”

Lainey records the beginning of her story, pictured on the opposite page, in two horizontal lines at the top of her paper. She uses small strokes and some letters from her name, each carefully separated by white space. She pauses to think, lifting her hand from the page, then picks up the narrative, syncing her writing with the rhythm of her speech. She continues the story, writing left to right across each line, filling the page.

EARLY WRITING EXPERIENCES

What every teacher and parent should know about why young children need to write

By Deborah Wells Rowe
Adults are charmed when they observe preschoolers like Lainey “pretending” to write. It’s easy to recognize the sophistication of her language as she retells this familiar tale using vocabulary and phrases from a well-loved storybook. It’s more difficult to recognize what Lainey is learning about writing. Is this really writing? How important are these kinds of early writing experiences?

Is Lainey writing?
A half century of research has shown that long before children produce conventionally spelled words, they write with small, individual strokes surrounded by white space, letter-like forms, and alphabet letters chosen without regard to conventional spelling. Lainey’s writing is unconventional, but it’s not random. Her story is the output of keen observations of print features such as “unit-ness,” the directional layout of print, and speech—print match. When adults first began to ask Lainey to read her writing (“What does it say? Read it to me.”), she mumbled an unintelligible reply. With more experience, she began to orally read messages appropriate for the social situation. Now, Lainey confidently uses marks on the page to compose her messages.

Lainey sees herself as a writer, but should we? Early childhood writing researchers answer with a resounding, “Yes!”

According to Yetta Goodman, writing begins when children show they believe they are making meaning through their marks. Lainey’s writing processes are not so different from those of adults. She makes meaning, even while she continues to learn conventional writing forms. In fact, it was through participation in everyday writing events that she noticed the writing forms and processes used by more experienced writers, and where she developed her current understandings.

Why is early writing important?
As educators, our job is to help other adults appreciate the power of young children as literacy learners. Adults need to understand that, for young children, writing serves as a natural test bench for exploring print. Writing with peers and adults has motivated Lainey to figure out how print works, what kinds of messages can be represented, and why print is used in different social situations. It’s by participating as a writer that Lainey has come to see herself as the kind of person who can and will write. Once children identify as writers, they are motivated to notice how others write in authentic situations and to use these ideas in their own texts.

Recent standards have highlighted the importance of writing for college and career readiness. However, in the early childhood years, writing is also a way into reading. A growing body of research, including the U.S. National Early Literacy Panel report, has shown that writing in preschool and kindergarten is positively related to literacy subskills such as letter identification, phonological awareness, and letter–sound correspondence, and to better overall outcomes in reading, writing, and spelling in first grade and beyond. When children compose their own messages, they slow down, connect, and integrate literacy subskills in a meaningful context.

Writing and reading are two sides of the same coin. Writing builds foundational reading skills. Reading builds understanding of the content, processes, and purposes of writing.

What does this mean for teachers and parents?
First, adults need to remember that children begin to write long before their texts look conventional. Adults can provide support by encouraging children’s participation in writing. The simplest way to do this is by inviting children to write their own messages as part of play and other everyday activities. Instead of writing for the child, our motto should be: “Put the pen in the child’s hand!”

Second, adults need to interact with young children as if they are writers, even when their texts look unconventional. With two simple requests, “What did you write?” and “Read it to me,” adults can position children as writers.

Third, teachers and parents need to talk with children about their texts. Adults need to accept and value children’s writing by responding to the meaning of their marks. Keeping the emphasis on meaning making rather than error correction is important, as research has shown that form will follow function.

Fourth, adults need to provide demonstrations of “adult writing” by writing alongside the child or by coauthoring shared texts. It’s in shared activities that it’s most possible to individualize instruction.

Fifth, in the meaningful context of children’s own writing, adults can provide targeted demonstrations of handwriting techniques and the use of letter–sound relationships to invent spellings. Both are related to better reading and writing outcomes.

A call to action
Though most adults know reading to young children is important, few appreciate the importance of writing. Recent research has shown that very little writing is going on in early childhood classrooms—often only one or two minutes per day. It’s time to turn this around.

We have a deep and well-developed research base that can help adults appreciate and support young children’s writing. Now it’s up to policymakers, curriculum designers, and professional educators to get the word out: Young children need to write!
For several years, I have taught content area literacy courses to university students who are preparing to be middle- and secondary-level teachers. Vocabulary development is a topic that I give a lot of attention to because it is the backbone of every content area. It is very difficult for students to successfully engage in content-based reading and conversation without understanding the vocabulary associated with it.

Susan Craig
(craig-s@mssu.edu), an ILA member since 2016, is the interim department chair for Teacher Education at Missouri Southern State University. She has taught cross-content literacy courses to students seeking middle- and secondary-level certification for 11 years.
While many textbooks do an excellent job of addressing vocabulary (e.g., including definitions of complex tier 3 words alongside text, offering glossaries), many middle and secondary students could benefit from intentional exposure to content-specific vocabulary before reading. This exposure could make the reading more manageable and students may be more likely to persist.

After years of considering the best way to approach content area vocabulary, I am embracing the idea of intentional and engaging vocabulary touch points, such as the following:

- Visual support (videos, drawing or viewing pictures, etc.)
- Kinesthetic support (demonstration, acting out)
- Experimenting with words by using them in context (writing, speaking)

In my classes, I have students preparing to teach many different content areas, and I believe these touch points can be used in any of them. For example, I work with several physical education majors. Their vocabulary often comprises tier 3 anatomy words. A common word is *dorsiflexion*, which is the ability to extend the fingers and toes toward the body. Proper dorsiflexion of the toes is critical for ankle mobility, which is necessary for minimizing sports injury.

An approach using the three touch points could involve the following:

- Showing a video or image of someone demonstrating dorsiflexion of the toes
- Demonstrating, and asking students to demonstrate, dorsiflexion
- Pairing students and asking them to talk with each other as they do their warm-up stretching. In their discussion, they should intentionally use the word *dorsiflexion* (as well as other related vocabulary) and describe its importance so they can practice using the word in context.

These touch points provide students multiple ways to experience vocabulary. More important, talking about vocabulary as they demonstrate it actually makes content vocabulary more relevant and meaningful.

Following are some ideas I share with my future teachers.

**Word mapping**

Since Dorothy Frayer and her colleagues developed the Frayer Model in the late 1960s, word mapping using graphic organizers has been a powerful strategy for analyzing vocabulary. Graphic organizers are very nimble and can be adjusted to ask for specific attributes.

A common tier 3 concept in math is the isosceles triangle, which has two even sides. A teacher could design a word map that asks for definition, drawing of a non-example, and a picture of an example found in the student’s environment (e.g., a roofline). Students can also use their bodies to build isosceles triangles, which would involve students negotiating who would compose the equal sides. Students could use the cameras on their phones to document their product.

**Word walls**

Word walls are gaining popularity in middle and secondary classrooms. Word walls involve displaying relevant vocabulary with contextual definitions, pictures, and so forth on the classroom wall for easy reference and reinforcement. Word walls can be changed with various topics and units.

Using Web 2.0 tools such as Padlet can enhance word walls. Padlet is a virtual bulletin board. Students add vocabulary words and definitions to the board and can add photos, videos, webpages, and more to support the definition. Students and teachers can share and build pages together.

**Throwback game stations**

Most of us have played Memory, Charades, and Twister. These games can be adapted to be energetic approaches to learning new words.

Each semester, I ask my students to give me five tier 3 words from their content areas. I use construction paper to create a floor-sized memory game. Students work in teams to match the words with the definitions.

For Charades, I select words that students can demonstrate or act out, pair students up, tape a word to their backs, and ask their partner to demonstrate it so they can guess the word. I also tape several Twister mats together, write words on the dots, and students play Vocabulary Twister.

Students move through each of the stations and receive multiple exposures to different tier 3 words. I wrap this up by asking students to write about the process and the words they learned on an exit slip.

**Vocabulary storytelling**

Storytelling is an excellent way for students to use words in context. Although we often associate storytelling with ELA, it can be an effective activity for practicing correct word usage in any content area. I split students into teams and ask them to collaboratively write a story using five of the tier 3 words they provided. They must write themselves in as characters. The results are always creative and often humorous. I encourage them to act out the stories for extra credit.

**Powerful, relevant exposure**

A great way to get started with planning intentional vocabulary instruction that addresses the touch points is to brainstorm with teachers from various content areas. Make a list of ideas and talk about how approaches commonly used in one content area could be adapted for others. I encourage my students to try strategies that stretch their comfort (e.g., storytelling using content vocabulary in math and science). Sometimes, the approaches that seem the least intuitive are the ones students remember the most.

Although there is a place for teaching new vocabulary via direct instruction, I encourage teachers to consider the value of integrating the multiple touch points. It can be a powerful way to allow students high-energy and relevant exposure to content vocabulary that exercises different cognitive muscles. It’s fun, active, and goes a long way in improving student understanding.
want to talk about the possibilities of transmedia in K–12 classrooms today, but I want to start by illustrating how this genre of storytelling can shape our understanding of the world around us. In fact, if you’re anything like me, you are already immersed in a continually shifting transmedia narrative.

If you’re reading this in the United States, for example, you are probably inundated with relentless dialogue, news updates, and occasionally uncomfortable family conversations related to national politics. From updates on my phone before I wake up, to the content of the podcasts that accompany my commute, to the aggravated missives and posts on my social network feeds and in my inbox, a constant story of discontent and of action is woven through various media ephemera around me. And although this story is one woven from real life, it illustrates how—as a culture—we have changed how we communicate and share information today.

A NARRATIVE ACROSS PLATFORMS

Transmedia, politics, and encouraging youth authorship anywhere and anytime

By Antero Garcia

Antero Garcia (anterobot@gmail.com), an ILA member since 2012, is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University. Prior to completing his PhD, he was an English teacher at a public high school in South Central Los Angeles. Antero codesigned the Critical Design and Gaming School, a public high school in South Central Los Angeles.
In considering our engagement with contemporary politics as transmedia, I am describing transmedia storytelling as the process of constructing a narrative across different kinds of media. I believe that we can adapt pedagogically because of the currently unfolding example of how adults consume, discuss, and participate in an unfolding narrative of national politics. Let’s consider how this complicated cacophony of updates highlights how stories can be read and told in classrooms today.

**Endless possibilities**

Let me offer a few aspects of transmedia storytelling that can support powerful contexts of learning:

- It is *sticky*. Like the example of national politics, a transmedia story can be pervasive. No matter where one turns, it is constantly present. As a way to *read* a story, it is not confined to the space between the covers of a book.
- It is *messy*. A transmedia story is often not told linearly. Instead, readers must assemble a story from the fragments of narrative scattered across different media. This could mean scouring the contents of a fictitious Facebook page, listening to an audio message, and riffling through the pages of a newspaper.
- It is *interest driven*. Despite the previous sticky and messy descriptions, a powerful transmedia story for young people can be authored and guided by the interests of students.

To be clear, as I describe the contexts of transmedia and its classroom possibilities, I see two different paths from which instruction can develop. On the one hand, there are myriad ways transmedia narratives can be read. Perhaps students excited by lasting blockbuster franchises such as Star Wars or The Avengers are offered opportunities to explore how the narratives in these films extend into novels, comic books, mobile apps, and other textual products.

Likewise, there are intentional transmedia texts that can be explored in classroom contexts. The young adult novel *Cathy’s Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233* by Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman (Running Press), for example, has more than half a dozen working phone numbers. To fully experience the narrative of this book, readers must call voicemail numbers (hopefully having already found the passcodes to access awaiting messages) and may visit websites with additional narrative content. Such a book highlights that reading, in an era of transmedia where our adult devices buzz with world news updates, means engaging with a fictional world in more than singular modes.

At the same time, educators should also consider how the complex (sticky, messy, and interest-driven) landscape of transmedia storytelling is a space that is ripe for student writing. Literacies today mean encouraging youth to consider how they might tell or retell a story in new ways.

What, for example, would a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* look like if students authored it through collectively developed text messages, newspaper articles, Facebook pages, documentary films, and trial documents? Perhaps the class collectively tells various firsthand accounts of how the play’s opening scuffle between the Montagues and Capulets went down; like *real* life, these texts may contradict and further add to the messy world of transmedia storytelling.

**Mimicking real life**

I want to recognize that, taken individually, there isn’t much that’s new about any one of the kinds of writing and production practices I have suggested. Rather, transmedia is about constructing and promoting a narrative across these different media.

These texts encourage students to choose how to write and share the information that interests them in the ways that feel most engaging. (Perhaps our young Romeo wore a step-counting device like a Fitbit on his final dates that showed how many paces he took until his final demise!) In this sense, both reading and writing transmedia are about centering the interests and meaning making of young people on how we explore stories today.

Finally, in considering how transmedia is changing the ways stories are being told, we should think critically about why we read and produce the stories we do. Accessibility of complex media production tools makes transmedia storytelling a vivid possibility in classrooms today (both as texts to be read and as texts to be written). However—as we should question *any* text in classrooms—what stories are being told? Whose voices are being privileged?

Returning to the transmedia soap opera that trickles across my various media platforms daily, I recognize that national politics causes discomfort, distress, and potentially harmful policy shifts for individuals across the United States; this is a transmedia narrative with lasting consequences. What are the feelings, questions, and actions you hope to incite in the transmedia possibilities with your students? By incorporating transmedia and fostering the type of critical thinking that comes with it, we can help our students sort out the messy storytelling, both in the classroom and in real life.
Books for Every Child

How the Greenbrier Bookcase Project ensures young readers have access to quality books at home

By Angela Betancourt

As educators, we know the importance of reading to young children. We want them to come to school rich in experiences with the written word. Children who have listened to read-alouds during their early years have had their imaginations stimulated and have an expanded understanding of the world. Their language and listening skills are better developed, and they have been prepared to understand the written word.

Books in the home are also linked to greater student achievement throughout their educational careers. This is especially true of students from low socioeconomic status families. The addition of books to the home library has a positive impact on standardized test scores. Researchers have also discovered that giving children access to books helps to develop a lifelong love of reading.

What more reason is there to make ownership of books at an early age a top priority?

Promoting early reading

The Greenbrier community in Arkansas, in partnership with schools, local businesses, and the North Central Arkansas Reading Council, recognized the need for access and made putting books into the hands of every child a top priority. Many of our children do not have the resources to own a variety of books in their homes. With limited financial resources and working parents who may not be able to go to the library often, many of these children miss out on the enriching power of books.

With the mission to provide books for our neediest 3- and 4-year-olds, we created the Greenbrier Bookcase Project. We based the program on a similar initiative, A Bookcase for Every Child, started by Jim Davidson, a newspaper columnist in Conway, AR, in 2005. Greenbrier joined in and started its own project in 2012, recruiting board members from the community to help with fundraising, building, and delivering bookshelves and books.

Since that time, we have distributed 40 bookcases per year. Vital contributors of this project are ILA members in our Greenbrier schools who help us identify preschool-age children in need of this special gift of literacy. The project is strictly a community endeavor and uses no tax money or grants. A fundraiser is held every year that allows us to buy the needed materials, and then community members lend their craftsmanship by building the bookshelves and adorning them with personalized nameplates.

Each handcrafted bookshelf is then stocked with a starter set of books from community donations for each child.

They have a piece of furniture that belongs just to them, and on that furniture is a set of books to be read and enjoyed over and over again. It’s a gift the entire family can enjoy.
Celebrating literacy

A celebration is held each year at the local elementary school to present the children in the Greenbrier ABC Preschool program with their individual bookshelves and collection of books. All of those involved—board members, project participants, students, and their families—are excited to come together in fellowship over reading and literacy development in our community. The ceremony opens with a welcome from a local reading council officer and an invocation from a bookcase project board member. Then there are books read, stories told, treats eaten, and lots of laughter shared.

The culminating activity is the presentation of the bookcases to each smiling pre-K student. When each name is called, the student stands next to his or her bookcase as parents and community members take photos.

The lasting impact

The true reward is knowing that children are being given an opportunity that they may not have otherwise had. They have a piece of furniture that belongs just to them, and on that furniture is a set of books to be read and enjoyed over and over again. It’s a gift the entire family can enjoy.

Though we don’t have testing data to prove that the books given have increased each of the participating students’ test scores, we see firsthand how successful this project truly is. Parents have shared memories of when they were read to as children. They are so thankful that their child has received the means to have the same kinds of experiences.

One board member recalls a student who was so excited about his bookcase that he wanted to carry it out to the car all by himself. Of course, his dad had to carry it, but that little guy kept his hands on it to help carry the new bookcase and deliver it safely to his bedroom.

Getting children excited about books is the first step in creating a love of reading that will last a lifetime. What better start can we give our youngest Greenbrier students than providing them with a bookcase stocked full of books to share with their family and friends for years to come?
Professor Janet Condy felt overwhelmed as she watched her “students” laugh over their makeshift costumes: feathers, beaks, masks, and dog tails fashioned out of old newspapers and masking tape. The group of adult educators was performing a story from a children’s book of fables as part of their 13-week training.

If not for the presence of two translators, an outsider would have never suspected that the cast was made up of two language groups—Sinhala and Tamil—that have long been cleaved apart by ethnic grievances.

“At the end of the program, one gentleman stood up and said he had never been in the same room as a Tamil-speaking person,” says Condy, a professor at Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa.

Condy was coleading this Active Teaching and Learning Approaches in Schools (ATLAS) workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in May. A joint project of ILA, ChildFund Sri Lanka, and the Ministry of Education, the workshop—the
first module of which was held in 2016—aimed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in 170 primary schools across six provinces in Sri Lanka. The leaders trained 60 in-service advisors (ISAs) from the Ministry of Education, who then cascaded the training to roughly 900 classroom teachers.

As the leaders prepared for the training, the Ministry of Education strongly advised them to separate the Sinhalese and Tamil speakers.

“Normally we think that because in Sri Lanka we have two languages, our education process is also going to be based in two languages,” says Jagath Kusumsiri, a technical specialist for ChildFund Sri Lanka.

### The groups’ history

Tensions between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority began to rumble when the island nation gained independence in 1948. Resentful of the British favoritism toward the Tamils during the colonial period, the Sinhalese disenfranchised Tamil migrant plantation workers from India and made Sinhala the official language. The Tamil responded by forming a separatist group and, in 1976, began to campaign for a homeland in northern and eastern Sri Lanka, where most of the island’s Tamils reside.

Riots erupted in a bloody 26-year-long civil war that claimed more than 80,000 lives. Eight years have passed since the Sinhalese defeated the Tamil insurgents, but the country is still healing.

In the wake of the war and the devastating 2004 tsunami, the Sri Lankan government has worked to rebuild its schools and education system, which is characterized by high dropout rates and poor attendance. Despite the country’s high literacy rate, few learning spaces, poor infrastructure, and limited government support for teacher training have resulted in stark disparities in educational attainment levels.

Students’ success is often determined as early as age 10, when they take the Grade 5 Scholarship Exam. Students who score at 90% or higher will receive a scholarship to continue on to a top-tier secondary school. The exam was implemented to provide an avenue for students who do not have the means to finance their education and to place bright students in better schools, but many believe it has achieved the opposite effect; most students require additional training—which is prohibitively expensive—to pass the exam.

Roshan Dela Bandara, liaison manager at ChildFund Sri Lanka, says the high-stakes exam is a source of severe anxiety for young students.

“The parents and the teachers all want their children to pass the exam. But normally only 5% pass,” he says. “They don’t have time to study leisurely and play.”

### An unexpected outcome

The purpose of the ATLAS workshop is to train teachers how to incorporate more interactive play- and activity-based education in the classroom. The Ministry of Education is rewriting Sri Lanka’s primary-level curriculum to include these principles.

Condy was conducting a Readers Theatre with a Sinhalese group when a few Tamil-speaking ISAs approached her tentatively and asked if they could join the performance. The two language groups were soon role playing, communicating through exaggerated gestures and “thumbs up.”

“If one person was holding a dialogue in Sinhala, another person’s response came out in Tamil. It was very artistic and interesting for the audience. It wasn’t intentional. We didn’t plan it. But it happened,” says Bandara.

Toward the end of the workshop, the ISAs took turns practicing the teaching strategies they had learned on their colleagues. After each mock lesson, the ISAs held a “debriefing” session, where they critiqued the flow, strategies used, class management style, level of engagement, clarity of instructions, and more.

Condy was apprehensive about how they would respond to the debriefing activity, but she encouraged them to speak candidly.

“I found the participants were very critical with each other despite whether they were Tamil- or Sinhalese-speaking,” says Condy. “They felt we had created a safe environment for these critical reflections to happen and they realized how beneficial this process was.”

On the basis of the success of this workshop, the leaders hope to merge the two language groups in future workshops.

“We don’t need to [separate them]. Both groups can work together,” Kusumsiri says. “We can take both groups together, and they can share a lot of things within their groups. Before, they did not have that chance.”

Bandara says the participants enjoyed learning from each other and encouraged the leaders to hold another joint training.

“Around the country, different teachers have different skills. I observed their exchange of skills. They started to make a connection, and now they might be calling each other and sharing their experiences and supporting each other,” Bandara says.

By engaging their differences, they had started a dialogue.

“Several people told me it was the most effective reconciliation workshop they had ever attended,” Condy says. “It was an unexpected but amazing outcome.”

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**Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird Release New Book**

ILA members Christina L. Dobbs (Boston University) and Jacy Ippolito (Salem State University), along with Megin Charner-Laird (Salem State University) coauthored a new book, *Investigating Disciplinary Literacy: A Framework for Collaborative Professional Learning* (Harvard Education Press), released in August, provides a framework for professional development to support teachers and leaders in designing and implementing disciplinary literacy instruction.

**Haugen Promoted to Principal Post**

Lauri Haugen was named principal at Fabyan Elementary School in Illinois. She brings 17 years of experience to the role, including time as an elementary educator, literacy specialist, and reading specialist.

**Paine Named Interim Admin**

Michele Paine was named interim principal at Flathead High School in Montana. She started at the school in 1999 as a reading specialist. She then served as a K–12 language arts facilitator for the district before being named assistant principal at Flathead. Paine is a past president of the Montana State Reading Council and a board member of the Northwest Montana Reading Council.

**Tovani Honored with SIG Award**

Cris Tovani, a literacy educator, consultant, and staff developer, received the Adolescent Literacy Thought Leader Award from ILA’s Secondary Reading Interest Group. Tovani is the author of several books, including *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers* (Stenhouse) and *No More Telling as Teaching: Less Lecture, More Engaged Learning* (Heinemann).

E-mail your announcement and headshot to literacytoday@reading.org for consideration on the News & Notes page.
What Does It TAKE?

Whether serving from the classroom or the admin office, what qualities should a literacy leader possess?

“Empathy first and foremost. Leaders need to understand how literacy affects us individually. Empathy helps. Asks us to walk in others’ shoes.”
—Teri Lesesne, Texas

“A literacy leader knows current research and does what is best for students and helps guide other teachers into new best practices, even when it’s uncomfortable.”
—Jeremiah Henderson, Washington

“A literacy leader should be willing to read the books that kids are reading or interested in. Recommendations should go both ways.”
—Heather Jennings, Maryland

“A literacy leader is responsive—to colleagues, to students, to families—offering resources, knowledge, and personalized teaching.”
—Tracy Lafreniere, Rhode Island

“They should love reading and understand that self-selected reading for pleasure and listening to a fluent reader read engaging books are paramount.”
—Holly Dysart, Taiwan

“Teacherness—teacher leadership. The ability to model practice as an effective educator while collaboratively driving/supporting a team.”
—Kyle Manders, Florida

“First thing: A literacy leader understands that literacy is more than reading and writing! It’s also speaking, listening, and thinking.”
—Devontae Kelley, Tennessee

“Someone who ‘practices what they preach.’ Best lesson learned as an ELA teacher is to teach reading/writing, I should be doing it with my kids!”
—Sarah Eaton, Ohio

“Empathy. We get so wrapped up in data, but we need to remember the daily struggle and hope of the students and teachers and build on that.”
—J-Lynn Van Pelt, Virginia

“A literacy leader and teacher needs to be a stronger listener. They need to listen to whatever the specific needs are of the students to help them.”
—Courtney Leard, Maryland

Chime In!

For our November/December issue, we want to know: What are you doing in your classroom to foster critical thinking in the digital age? E-mail your answer, in 50 words or fewer, to literacytoday@reading.org by October 5 and it could appear in the next issue.
How ILA’s Choices project inspires the next generation of lifelong readers

By Cheryl McCall

I have always loved reading, but over the years, I have taught many middle school students who do not. Something happens during those three years that sends students down one of two paths: lifelong reader or “I will read only if I have to” reader.

As a sixth-grade language arts teacher, I spent hours looking for the right book for every one of my students. I wanted them to leave my classroom committed to being a lifelong reader — and a lot of them did!

When I accepted the position of library media specialist at my middle school, I was overwhelmed at the prospect of talking to 650 students every two weeks about the latest books. I didn’t know what seventh and eighth graders would like. How could I connect to all of them and help them find a book? I found my answer quite by accident.

I attended a session at the Summer Refresher professional development led by our Kentucky Association of School Librarians in 2014 about ILA’s Young Adults’ Choices project, but only because the session I really wanted to attend was full. I am a big proponent of student choice, so I thought this would be a good option. I am so glad my first choice was full. One of the goals of the Young Adults’ Choices project, which results in a booklist of 30 titles chosen by YA readers themselves, is to provide middle and secondary students with an opportunity to voice their opinions about books being written for them. I wanted to be a part of this list because it is unique in that it is populated by students.

I filled out the volunteer application and was thrilled when I received an e-mail saying I had been chosen to join the team.

When boxes and boxes of new books began arriving in August 2014 from all the major publishers, I could hardly contain my excitement. And that excitement spread. During my first of what would be three years with the project, I received two copies of almost 400 books. I explained to my students that they were going to get to read and choose the books that other students around the world would pick up and read.

From August until March, students read and voted for their favorites. I booktalked as many titles as I could every two weeks, but now I was also seeing students drop by between classes to ask me what arrived that day. At the end of February 2015, we had more than 4,000 votes cast, and in May, the list was revealed. At the ILA conference that July — and again this past July — I shared with many authors how much my students love their books. In the fall, I will share with my students the conversations I had and continue to spread the excitement about books.

This project has helped me connect to students as I read the latest young adult books. With ILA’s help, I now have more motivated, lifelong readers than ever before.

Cheryl McCall (cheryl.mccall@oldham.kyschools.us), an ILA member since 2013, taught middle school English language arts for 20 years before moving into her current position as library media specialist at East Oldham Middle School in Kentucky. She credits ILA for helping her grow as an educator by providing opportunities and resources to help kids become lifelong readers.

For information on how to get involved in the Young Adults’ Choices project, as well as Children’s Choices and Teachers’ Choices, visit literacyworldwide.org/choices.
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