**Expanding Students’ Reading Experiences by Valuing Their Preferences**

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Working with young people to engage them with reading, we cannot lose sight of our long-term goals—fostering lifelong, joyful readers. While each person constructs a unique reading identity and finds ways to sustain their reading habits, we can identify some commonalities in behaviors and attitudes across backgrounds and age groups. Many avid readers express preferences for specific authors, genres, and formats based on their interests and reading experiences (Miller, 2013). Identifying students’ preferences (or lack of reading preferences) provides insight into their experiences and how best to help them grow and remain engaged.

Reading preferences reveal a lot about whether students have read much in the past. There is a difference between the seventh grader who says they enjoy “Dystopian science fiction like Scythe” and the seventh grader who says they like “scary books.” One response shows some familiarity with books, authors, genres, or series that might inform future book choices. One response reveals less experience. Preferences are not always informed opinions, but they do provide insight. Limitations on access and choice often hinder students’ development of personal reading tastes. When school libraries and classrooms lack current, relevant books, or young people have few book sale outlets in their neighborhoods, it is less likely they will find books they enjoy. True preferences come from wide reading. Sampling from many types of books increases students’ knowledge of what’s available and gives readers a better chance of finding topics and voices that resonate with them.

At the beginning of the school year, students’ existing reading preferences provide starting points for connecting them with books. Valuing their tastes shows students we trust them to make their own decisions about what they read. We can build their confidence by offering books that match their interests. As the year progresses, deeper knowledge of students’ preferences and abilities helps us challenge them beyond their comfort zones and offer books that expand their reading experiences.

While we do not want students to miss the expansive joys of reading and the increased social comprehension reading widely provides (Dodell-Feder & Tamir, 2018), adults must recognize that children who read a lot, and express strong reading preferences, have highly developed reading identities already. Yes, we have a responsibility to encourage them to read widely, but don’t despair if your most avid readers don’t choose to read a poetry book this year. Independent reading isn’t their only exposure to text. Continue offering books that stretch them, but don’t take it personally if they push back on your suggestions. Books that connect in some way to the ones they like to read can challenge readers who are in a rut. A sideways move instead of a full leap. Offer graphic novel editions of fictional favorites or nonfiction that builds background knowledge or extension for the books students read. Promote more #OwnVoices titles and authors in the genres they prefer as well as authors who write across genres or formats.

Students’ reading tastes reveal a lot about what they avoid reading, too. Through reading advisory conversations and reading conferences, we can dig into students’ reasoning behind why they enjoy reading certain types of books more than others. While many of my middle school students liked reading contemporary realistic fiction, fantasy, and science fiction, a much smaller group preferred historical fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. My students have taught me that when they express negative attitudes towards certain books, they lack meaningful, positive reading experiences with them. Consider students’ past experiences when they claim to dislike an entire genre or format. What types of nonfiction have they encountered? Textbook chapters? Test passages?

If students’ prior reading experiences have been negative or absent, how can we counteract them? We can begin by examining our curriculum documents and the books chosen for read-alouds, book clubs, and recommended reading lists. What limitations do we see? Do these resources reflect a range of genres and formats, including contemporary texts alongside traditional classics? Whose voices are missing? Frankly, how old and white are the books students are assigned and encouraged? How often do students read trade books in comparison to textbook passages and excerpts? What learning do we ask students to show when they read? How can we reduce the marginalia, worksheets, and projects attached to students’ reading, especially independent reading? Intentional planning and effort can reduce many of the negative interactions with texts students experience.

Beyond school assignments, we can increase students’ positive reading experiences with texts by promoting and sharing books they claim to dislike. Provide frequent opportunities for students to preview, share, and discuss books they might read. Encourage students who enjoy reading less popular genres or well-known authors to recommend their favorites to classmates through book talks and reviews. Store and share students’ recommendations on a private YouTube channel or another platform, and organize them by genre, format, or whatever categories serve readers best. Work with colleagues and students to create “If You Like This, You Might Like This…” lists and displays that connect to current favorites and offer something new to try.

When considering students’ preferences, recognize that many lifelong readers have strong feelings about the types of books they enjoy. Librarians and teachers must determine whether students’ preferences stem from wide reading experiences or from limited ones and respond accordingly. Abundant access, exposure to a wide variety of books, encouragement for their reading choices, and lots of positive reading experiences help students develop reading tastes and joyful reading lives of their own.