

Quantity

AND

Quality

SANDRA
WILDE

*Increasing the
Volume and
Complexity of
Students' Reading*

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PART ONE

Why?

Volume and Complexity

The premise of this book is simple: that establishing the reading of books as the center of our literacy curriculum is the secret to academic achievement. Students from grades 1 to 12 need to read more books than they do now, and to gradually move into harder books. This isn't mere recreational reading, nor is it requiring them to read "grade-level" books. It's getting kids reading, and making sure that readers are growing.

The core principles are the following:

1. Everyone reads a lot, including setting personal goals, as described below.
2. Everyone reads widely: fiction and information, different genres, topics, and styles. You can also read narrowly or deeply if you want: all of the *Twilight* books in a row, everything you can find on spiders.
3. Everyone grows as a reader. The goal each year is to read more challenging books over the course of the year than those you read at the beginning. The reader chooses the books, but the teacher mentors.
4. There's time for reading during the school day. The amount will vary depending on circumstances, but reading needs to be part of school, not just a hobby.
5. Teachers help kids become smarter readers. This includes literal and informational understanding, and also literary appreciation. There needs to be plenty

of teaching, in individual conferences and in lessons and conversations for small groups and the whole class.

6. Everyone keeps a record of books read. Readers need to monitor and document the extent of their reading.

These twelve years in school are the beginning of each student's whole life as a reader. It's not just about learning to read because they'll need it for college and career; it's about becoming a reader as part of who they are right now and for whatever they do in their personal and professional lives in the decades ahead.

Volume, range, growth, time, sophistication, documenting, ownership for life. That's it.

I'm suggesting—no, shouting—that there can be nothing more important than putting reading at the very center of what goes on in your classroom. This is especially true in the self-contained classrooms of elementary schools and many middle schools, but also applies in somewhat different ways to the departmentalized programs of secondary schools. One very important reason for focusing on reading so forcefully is that these are the years when students have the time to read: indeed, the learning that it represents is their primary job. When they get to college, their learning will be much more narrowly focused, and adult life in the family and workplace will be even busier. They need to leave each grade, up through the end of high school, with a solid foundation of books read, and the ability to read harder books than they could at the beginning.

Notice that I'm focusing on books; written language is available in many other forms today, and the pull of screens is strong, but readers need the length and weight of books for the depth and complexity of learning and feeling they provide. A short story, no matter how great, will never stay with you the way a novel does. You'll learn only a small amount about Martin Luther King from a blog post, as compared to a biography. The ether is alive with millions of snippets of ideas, but extended experiences with ideas and stories in books are the solid foundation of reading and learning.

We have clear and abundant evidence that reading a lot matters. It's not enough to teach students how to read, we have to ensure that they *do* read. Listed below are ten

big ideas to make my case. Although in a sense they're statements about the value of reading in general, their real power comes when the volume read is large and the complexity of what's read increases over time. (I owe a great debt here to the work of Stephen D. Krashen, whose *Power of Reading* [2004] provides a comprehensive, book-length account of research supporting the idea that reading itself, and lots of it, supports students' learning in many ways. His work underlies all ten of these big ideas. He also makes clear what adults need to do to allow this reading to happen, beginning with the most basic: access to books.)

1. There's a strong, strong connection between how much students have read and their reading achievement.

The table on page 12 (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988) shows the relationship between the time that students read per day and their level of proficiency. This isn't surprising. The cultural observer Malcolm Gladwell (2008) poses the idea that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert. (We're talking professional pianists, chess Grandmasters, and Bill Gates.) Ten thousand hours of reading spread throughout grades 1–12 would take two hours a day, every day of the year, which seems like a lot. But if kids read only half an hour a day, they could have read for 2,500 hours by grade 12. (Remember, the best readers are already reading an hour a day.) The authors of the books that children read are their most important reading teachers.

2. Reading makes you a better writer.

Even young children's writing reflects the kinds of reading that they've been exposed to (DeFord, 1981). The more kinds of writing you read, the more ways you'll be able to write yourself. It's not hard to write the way you talk, but it's hard to be a good writer if you're only representing speech written down; you need to know in your bones what good writing looks and sounds like, the more the better. Indeed, learning to use the special style of writing, the forms and words that rarely appear in speech, can only come from reading (Krashen, 2004, 132–34). Heck, reading a lot is even the biggest factor in how good a speller you are (Wilde, 1992).

3. Reading builds your vocabulary.

Not only does reading build your vocabulary, it's almost impossible to learn large numbers of words without it. There's a basic vocabulary of spoken English, then a wider range of words that occur less commonly in speech, then a huge universe of words that are found almost exclusively in books. We know that the words in the latter group are acquired almost entirely through reading, particularly with repeated exposure (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985).

4. Reading helps you learn.

This of course is obvious, but what I'd like to underline here is the efficiency of reading as a learning tool. The Internet is fine if you want to learn a little bit about a topic (dependent on the reliability of the website, of course), but is problematic for in-depth knowledge, because of search and reliability issues. We can find *information* quickly online, but *knowledge* is more complex. You can also get information from a video, but reading is easily twice as fast, so you can learn more. Also, you control the rate in reading, so you can speed up during parts where the content is more familiar to you. For the typical reader, an hour spent reading a book about the solar system will produce far more learning than an hour spent watching an educational video, and can be more closely tied to one's preexisting level of knowledge. Since books are edited and reviewed, the information in them has been screened for accuracy and quality of presentation in a way that Internet information may not be.

5. Reading helps you understand life better.

I'm speaking particularly about fiction and memoir here, the power of stories. Reading is a way to get inside other people's heads and understand their lives; you often learn more about them than you know about your friends. Even though fictional characters aren't real people, their authors have created them to explore human issues. Reading takes you outside the limits of your own experience, thereby helping you develop as a person.

6. Reading prepares you for all of adult life.

If you arrive at college with strong reading muscles and have experienced reading a lot of books of all kinds, you'll be well prepared for the courses you take. If you arrive in the workplace having read a lot, you'll be able to comfortably adapt to whatever literacy you need there. You'll also be able to be an intelligent citizen and consumer, able to read serious newspapers and magazines rather than being limited to tabloids. You'll also have the habits and abilities in place to be a lifelong learner; you can read books about parenting, places you're going to travel to, serious fiction — whatever you want. Personal reading in adult life need not be just a form of recreation, an alternative to TV or sports; it's not just a pastime but ideally a deep and regular source of life enrichment.

7. Volume of reading can help close the achievement gap.

Poverty can lead to a downward spiral in reading achievement. Students in poor neighborhoods are less likely to have access to books, therefore likely to read less, therefore less likely to read well. The “summer slump” in reading achievement has been found to be due largely to class differences in access to books and therefore in amount read over the summer (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2012). Lower-achieving children are more likely to be taught in ways that involve less actual reading (Allington, 1977). There's no reason why all children can't be reading the quantity and types of books that many of those from higher social classes already are.

8. Reading a lot helps the next generation.

Many children who don't read much have parents who, through no fault of their own, don't read much themselves, perhaps for reasons that go back generations. The parents, particularly of immigrants, may not be literate in English or even in their home language; indeed, their home language may not even have a written form. If we can create a generation of readers, we'll be creating a generation of parents in whose homes books are an essential part of children's upbringing.

9. Reading a lot finesses many curriculum concerns and issues.

If students are really reading more books and pushing into harder books, they'll master the Common Core State Standards, acquire much of the cultural literacy that Hirsch (1987) said was necessary for all citizens in a democracy (e.g., a passing acquaintance with terms and names like *macho*, *macrocosm*, *Madagascar*, and *maestro*), and pass standardized tests. They won't need to memorize spelling or vocabulary words. You won't need to download worksheets from the Internet or go to teacher stores. You'll be able to find a way to work in, with minimal angst, any books that your school district requires kids to read.

10. Reading is a gift to students.

I'm going to share a personal story here. I remember sitting in a reading group when I was about eight years old, being told the new words in the Dick and Jane story, and realizing that I already knew what the teacher was trying to teach me. I'd been a voracious reader since before I started school, and was almost always bored by the official reading we did in school, all the way through high school. My real intellectual life always went on in the reading I did outside of school, although it got harder and harder to fit in with each year's increasing homework pressures. Everything I've achieved in literacy, including the writing of several books, is grounded in the reading I did when younger, with the school reading largely irrelevant. (In college, when I got to choose my own courses, it got much better.) What a gift it can be to get students immersed in reading from the beginning and throughout, so that they can have an intellectual life *in* school.

I've told you why: now I'll tell you what and how. Each chapter deals with both volume and complexity; each chapter is a tool to support students' reading a lot of books and gradually reading harder books.