by | Judith Snyder



KEEP 'EM READING

READ IT ALL: EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE TEXT

GRADES 1–5

Discovering materials that will engage a reluctant reader's interest in reading can challenge every librarian. Students arrive with diverse background knowledge, life experiences, and interests. Meeting students' needs requires the librarian to create a welcoming environment with a wide array of materials. Common strategies to engage reluctant readers include schoolwide reading programs with competitive incentives, access to high-interest subjects, (e.g., comics, jokes, sports, fantastic facts, and mysterious, otherworldly topics), and nonfiction materials at all reading levels. What we don't often consider are alternative books and materials that can reach our divergent student populations.

Both parents and teachers are frequently concerned about students reading text that is "at their level." Although this is important for instruction, the goal for free reading is enjoyment. Adults should allow for students to follow their interests, regardless of the material's reading level. Students can practice with easier text and feel the satisfaction of accomplishment, or they can use and develop strategies to grasp the context of more difficult but highly motivating material. Balancing reading choices requires practice and flexibility.

All of the following strategies can be modified for most grade levels by adjusting the book/print selections to students' reading levels. Consider sharing these activities with parents who may want help encouraging their child to read.

Powerful Partnerships

Surround children with multiple opportunities for reading. Encourage parents to call attention to a broad range of reading that occurs daily—like cookbooks, magazines, coffee table books, newspapers and online journals, words that flow across the bottom of the television screen, food labels, instructional manuals, and signs in the neighborhood. This modeling shows the variety of purposes for reading and can be an important strategy for motivating students to read. Look for ways to help parents develop a home library with donated or traded books. Placing reading material around the home and establishing a reading time each day also helps children develop positive reading habits.

Develop a partnership with your public library by advertising ongoing services, special events (author visits, book clubs, etc.), and collection materials that will interest your students. Enlist the help of student reporters to communicate with your school community through newsletters, video webcasts, or website posts. Building awareness of new books and alternative texts will widen reading horizons in children's lives.

Recruit students to set up a Visual Communication Center in your library that mirrors text that students might read at home or in the community—stocking it with T-shirts, cereal boxes, maps, copies of sheet music, poetry, art prints, and travel pamphlets. Let students post comments about

events or upcoming activities, write paragraphs about kind deeds they have observed, or take part in other creative interactions. Older students might appreciate a book trading station where they can exchange personal copies of paperback books.



Reading Aloud

Students who struggle with reading may enjoy having an adult read aloud to them. Talking about the story or interacting with the pictures helps the student to focus on the story rather than the individual words. Balancing read aloud time with guided and independent reading fortifies confidence.

ONLINE

Give the Tips for Reading Aloud to Children handout (*www.librarysparks.com*) to parents and community members who read to your students.

Enthusiasm for listening improves when the adult's voice projects excitement for the material. Picture books can be read in one setting, but chapter books and nonfiction materials need a stopping point. Ending at an exciting or highly interesting point ignites students' curiosity and desire to return.

Audio Books

Audiobooks are similar to read-alouds, and what they lack in the personal touch, they compensate for by promoting story visualization and independent reading. Audiobooks can enable students who read below grade level to participate with the class in book discussions, thus boosting their confidence in comprehension abilities.

Budgets may not allow for your collection to have many audiobooks, so inform parents about downloadable audio content at the public library that can complement classroom novel studies or be used for quality entertainment.

Books with Diversity

Often our libraries don't contain enough books that show cultural diversity. Diverse collections are important for all children, but especially for children from minority populations. Multicultural books give minority students a chance to see people like themselves, while others learn to appreciate cultural differences and develop empathy.

Parents new to this country or who have limited English language can be enlisted to share alternative print materials. Invite them to read any type of print material in their native tongue (e.g., book, candy wrapper, letter, diary, postcard, magazine). Parents will feel welcomed and included, and students will gain insight into language and its rhythm.

Examine your collection for diversity by sampling portions of books at a time. Choose one shelf of fiction, biography, and picture books. Request data print outs showing copyright date and circulation statistics. Then physically look at each book on the shelf to identify diversity of content and/or pictures. Also check the diversity of authors. Develop your collection by using multicultural award lists available on the American Library Association website (*http://tinyurl.com/mrusymw*).

For a more complete analysis of your collection, see my previous LibrarySparks article, "Statistics for the Library Advocate" (*http://tinyurl.com/nxq8pks*). A collection analysis is a powerful tool to use in justifying budget needs, as well as providing information for future collection development.



Magazines and Newspapers

Magazines can be overlooked as an important source for reading material. Magazines are visually inviting to reluctant readers, and the variety of content in magazines provides exposure to many different subjects and interests. Sometimes tight budgets limit magazine subscriptions. If you need time to

build your inventory, try going to your local public librarian and ask for the old copies they plan to discard. You can also ask students for gently used magazines or request donations for new subscriptions. Find the magazines your students like and slowly build your own collection.

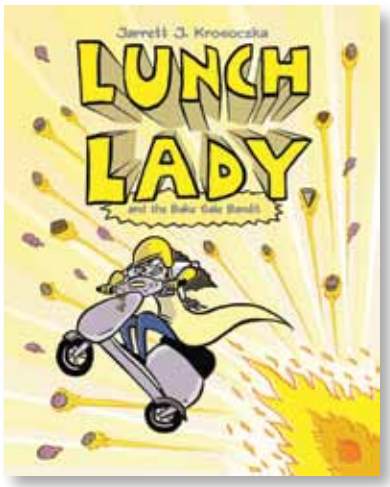
If your magazines haven't received a lot of circulation, it might be because students are unaware of the interesting content. Expose students to magazine content by using articles and stories for read aloud, and provide time for students to browse through magazines while in the library.

Gather magazines that focus on a variety of content areas and reading levels. Divide the class into table groupings and give each student in the group a different magazine (e.g., science, sports, multicultural, fiction, activity/craft). Allow enough time for students to browse through the magazine and identify one interesting item. It might be a fact, a picture, or the beginning of a story. Students share findings orally within groups and then pass the magazine clockwise. Repeat the exercise until each child has had an opportunity to explore several magazines.

Older students can repeat this exercise using newspapers. Divide a newspaper into sections and distribute them within each group. Give minimal instruction about identifying the subject of each section and the date written, and how to browse through titles, pictures, and captions to find an article of interest.

Untraditional Books

For highly visual students, graphic novels engage their interest and keep them focused on the story. Students begin to develop knowledge of story structures and use the brief text to confirm understanding of plot. Look for graphic versions of classic novels as well as the Lunch Lady, Babymouse, and Adventures of Tintin series.

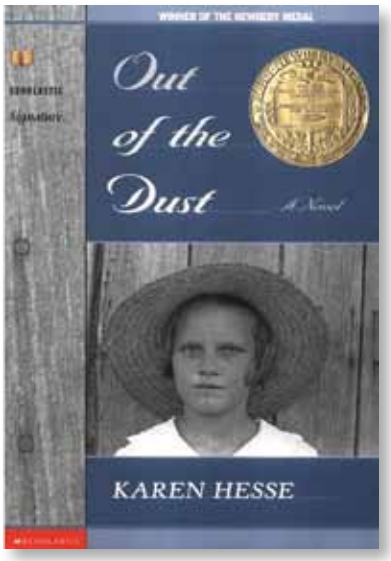


Interactive books, in which readers make decisions and proceed through the book accordingly, may appeal to some readers. Capstone and Chronicle have a series of books in which students choose what to do in events like Hurricane Katrina, the war in Afghanistan, or landing on Mars.

Picture novels can help reluctant readers step more comfortably into reading longer texts. *The Bad Kitty, Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, and Geronimo Stilton series, as well as *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, are but a few. Wordless picture books can be equally good for helping younger students to develop understanding of story structure.



Books written in free verse, using short phrases on each line, help both developing and reluctant readers who have difficulties reading long passages. Picture books by Byrd Baylor and the novels *Out of the Dust* by Karen Hesse and *Love that Dog* by Sharon Creech provide good examples of this emerging genre.



Book Series

Once students experience that electrifying connection with a book, they'll want more. Series make it easy for readers choose new books and stay with a character or genre they like. Use booktalks, reading aloud, and book trailers to introduce a variety of series. Or introduce the first book in a series by finding an old copy that you don't mind tearing apart into chapters. Read the first chapter aloud to introduce the characters and the setting. Divide the class into heterogeneous groups <AQ: What do you mean by heterogeneous groups?> and give one chapter to each group. Students read the chapter together and write a group summary.



Each group can draw a picture to illustrate the chapter summary. Compile into a class book and read aloud. Display the other books in the series.

Encourage students to branch out to similar books by searching the website What Should I Read Next? (*http://whatshouldireadnext.com*; find other what-to-read websites in "Tips from the Trenches" in the August/September 2014 LibrarySparks.)

Primary Sources

Search for primary source materials to supplement curriculum or genre studies. Diaries, journals, and letters from famous people provide readers with insight into historical periods (see *www.archives.gov/historical-docs*). <AQ: Could you be more explicit about how this ties into reluctant readers?>

Integrate, Coordinate, Differentiate

Work with a classroom teacher to support and extend a novel study. Many classic novels have abridged versions and audiobooks, and have been made into movies (e.g., *The Secret Garden, Black Beauty, A Wrinkle in Time, The Wizard of Oz*). Collect the different versions to meet the reading levels of your students. The classroom teacher can meet with small groups of students to conduct reading skill lessons needed for each group, with large group discussions about the characters and the plot. Incorporate nonfiction by developing a mini research project that pertains to a subject found in the book (e.g., gardening, horses, inventing, history, time travel). The end of the unit can culminate with viewing the movie or pertinent scenes. Students can be asked to compare, contrast, and evaluate the different media formats.

Developing Your Collection

As you consider the purchase of new materials for your collection, it is important to include materials that support curriculum and materials that will sustain and encourage the love of reading for a diverse population. By combining a welcoming library environment with a welcoming collection, students will want to "read it all."

Judith Snyder *is a seasoned teacher/librarian in Colorado, as well as a professional storyteller and freelance writer. Judith is the author of the Jump-start Your Library series, three books featuring hands-on library lessons from UpstartBooks (2008), and a picture book,* What Do You See? *(2009), from Odyssey Books.*