

Teachers as Readers: A Living History

Why do I love to read? How do I share that love with my students, and others? I have been thinking about and toying with this concept for years—and after reading our IRA president Maureen McLaughlin’s article in *Reading Today*, I have something to label it—something tangible that I can call this idea: Literacy History. “Literacy Histories chronicle our personal experiences from earliest memory to present day “(McLaughlin, 2013). McLaughlin continues to share her earliest memory of literacy: first teaching experience, first library experience, first try at writing, and her unique experiences of reading and writing in high school. She then invites the reader to consider their responses to “What’s your history?” How would you answer this question, and more? (See www.reading.org/lithistory.)

This idea could also be referred to as a reading recollection--thinking back to your early years and writing about your memories of exposure to literacy (de Onis, 1999). Years ago, MSRC’s president at the time, Jerry Sullivan, asked a seemingly innocent “ice breaker” question of a group of members at a leadership meeting: “What was your first experience with reading in school—was it positive? “ As it went around the table, I was surprised to hear over and over— from a bunch of reading teachers—that it had been a negative experience. Some cited examples of “wicked” teachers and their punishments, and what these had done to their attitudes about reading. Others swore that these negative experiences were exactly the reason why they had entered the education field. They would right the wrongs that had been done to them. By the time it got to me, I felt almost embarrassed to say that I think I taught myself to read by looking at the back of cereal boxes. I started school early because they wanted my mother to be the fifth grade teacher and I was too much of a handful for my aunt to babysit! I could already read when I started first grade. I honestly do not remember ever NOT knowing how to do this wonderful and mysterious thing called reading. It has always been a positive experience for me, a solitary hobby that has allowed a form of escape. I remember hearing others read poorly and cringing with the pain it caused the reader, but also feeling the pain it caused me to have to listen to it. They were stumbling through “Oh, oh, Puff!” and I wanted to disappear into my own books.

Delving into one’s Literacy History, or examining reading recollections from elementary school days might reveal our motivations for becoming a teacher in the first place. It will impact the outcome for our students and their reading success. It should shape our day-to-day lessons and our ability to give the world students with a lifelong love of reading. As literacy advocates, our early experiences and attitudes will shape and define our ability to teach.

Because of my Literacy History, books are my faithful friends. So whenever I come across a particularly meaningful section, I type it and save it in a file called Reflections, including the title and author. The author is speaking directly to me; it becomes a part of me. I can go back and reflect on it even years later. Now, with Pinterest, if I find a quotation about reading or books in general, I pin it and can print it for a small poster to motivate others.

To this end, I have created a list of questions that I am planning on using either with our staff at my school, or our local Central Montana Reading Council members. The purpose is to begin a dialogue to help us to examine our Literacy History. In addition, it could be a good first meeting for a book club. My questions include favorite books and series, which I might be able to use in the classroom. Email me at rwlucas@ttc-cmc.net for my list of questions. Teachers should inspire children, and teachers can inspire other teachers. My passion is reading and I have to share it!

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REFERENCES

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McLaughlin, M. (2013). What's your literacy history? Reading Today, 30(6), 2-4.