

## **“I Only Read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*” and Other Junior High Tales of Terror: Helping Boys Choose Books while Staying True to the Self-Selected Novel**

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*Abstract:* Nicklaus looks at the conundrum of at-risk boys who may need help with the selection process in the fact of the self-select novel.

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Don't get me wrong. Whether in ELA classes or reading intervention, the self-selected novel is an amazing option for a project. Ivey and Johnston (2013) did research on incorporating the self-selected novel into classroom work and found the benefits far reaching and more than just academic. That many students can become engaged readers on their own was a given, but they also learn to apply perspectives adapted from narratives to their own lives, not to mention interacting with texts in ways that cannot be observed (Ivey, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

Even though many students will jump at the chance to read their own selection of a novel, too many F's find their way into the gradebook at the end of it all. At my junior high, most of our academic problems are with the boys. The self-selected novel assignment strikes terror into the hearts of non-reading boys because of the difficulty they often have in finding books they will enjoy. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) go over this in *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* by making the point that boys need choice in their reading and to be taught how to read. In my experiences with boys from homes in poverty, many may even need to be taught how to approach choice in reading. They need to be taught how to determine what they are interested in, and how to go about finding books that satisfy that interest. Because their pasts are fraught with limited to no enjoyment at all with reading (many have never been read to at home, especially in the formative early years), boys need assistance with learning how to determine what they may enjoy in the first place. In the face of the self-selected novel assignment, teachers learn right away that many boys will try to sneak and read a book they already read as a

class years ago. Our ELA teachers learn this elementary canon and are adept at catching it. They then attempt to steer the student in the direction of the classroom library. Some students will be honest and ask if they can read a book they've already read because they know they like it (and it's safe).

Research shows that when teaching study strategies or reader response, students should read texts at least three times in order to be able to learn and utilize the information (Shanahan, 2012). So is re-reading a book really such a bad thing? It depends on the teacher's goal for the self-selected novel project. If your goal is for students to create a Project 8 assignment requiring them to gather information and reviews and create a book trailer, then choosing a book the student has read before is perfect. But if your purpose is growth in academic reading for greater competence in future ELA classes as well as encouraging life-long literacy, then we need to worry about students becoming frozen in time with their favorite third-grade chapter book. Worse yet is the student with no memories of a favorite book at all.

### **Literacy in a School with Changing Populations**

When I came to Wisconsin Rapids in 1995, the paper mill industry was thriving with a high percentage of white collar jobs in the city. The computer age heralded a diminished need for paper, so our mills have had to close or downsize. When I first came to East Junior High, the student body numbered nearly 1,000. In our current 2016-17 school year, we have 667 students, of whom 40% receive free or reduced lunch, and of whom 13% are people of color. Thirty-one students entered school after it began in the fall, with many from families in poverty. Some come from large metropolitan areas, some from Texas where their parents or guardians are migrant workers, and some leave school only to show up again a few weeks or months later. Many of these students are more than two grades below level and will end up in reading intervention. We currently have about 40 students in intervention, and every year we add a few more.

As a reading specialist/interventionist, my role is to increase reading motivation and achievement with the ultimate goal of increasing grade-level fluency for grade-level texts. This fluency must transfer to the student's academic reading in the core classes. Read 180, MVRC, and QReads are the commercial interventions used in our school, which I supplement with independent reading, conferencing, and writing with students. Regarding the self-selected novel, research points to it as the best choice over one-size-fits-all teacher-mandated novel choices (Ivey, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). I concur with Ivey and Johnston and enjoy using the self-selected novel with my students. However, many intervention students need to be guided to appropriate novel choices to help them grow in motivation and reading achievement (Bruckman, 2009; Horne 2009; Ivy & Johnston, 2015). When it comes to growing students in their reading ability, much of my work centers on getting students to work in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Horne, 2014; Vygotsky, 1981). We are in this zone when students benefit from our interactions with them in their reading projects, such as when we scaffold or guide them to more challenging books with new ideas, vocabulary, and text structures. As the reading teacher, I am preparing them to interface with the academic reading they will face in their core classes.



## **Tale of the One-Book Wonder**

*The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series is a phenomenal jumping off point for getting students to read. My 3rd grade daughter owns every book in the series. We often catch her reading (mostly from the snickers coming from her room) long after she was supposed to have retired for the evening. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* joins the list of books including *Hatchet*, *Holes*, and *Spirit Bear* that forms a safety net for many students coming to us as nonreaders.

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid* takes this one step further. Many boys read these books because they are humorous, illustrated, and a little irreverent. Stories like *Diary* protect us from having to start from scratch with boys who vehemently announce their hatred for reading and proudly declare they've never finished an entire book in their life. In spite of these obstacles, we need to find a way to carry out our business of widening their reading horizons.

## **Danse Macabre**

In regard to problems with self-selected books, some students are not thrilled with the prospect of reading a new book, even if they can select one to read on their own. In my qualitative assessment role, a phenomena I encounter almost every time with students more than two levels below grade level in reading is this: If they tell me that the last time they read a book was a few years ago, the grade level of the last book they completed usually ends up correlating to that grade level in reading. For example, testing some of my eighth-grade *Diary* students will show they are most comfortable with reading academic text between a third- and fifth-grade level. If I look into their cumulative records, I can see that they were once at grade level while in elementary school and pinpoint where the reading level scores began dropping off. Therefore, they must engage in quantity reading to catch up with their peers. It can be difficult when we are faced with conversations that inevitably turn into what I like to call the “Hole in the Bucket” dance. For example:

**8th or 9th grade student:** Can I read *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* for my self-selected novel? I love this book. These are the only books I read. All other books are boring.

**Me:** My 9 year old loves reading those books.

**Student:** She has good taste.

**Me:** That may be, but how is reading a book for the third time going to help you get ahead in your reading level?

**Student:** It's better than reading nothing. These are the only books I read. All other books are boring. How can I read another book when they're all boring?

**Me:** It is better than nothing, you're right about that. What if I were to teach you how to widen your reading horizons?

**Student:** What does that mean?

**Me:** What if I were to introduce you to books that you would love reading more than you ever could imagine in your wildest dreams? What if I could open up a whole new world of books for you to read other than *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*?

**Student:** How would you do that? The only good books are *Diary*.

**Me:** You can let me show you other books that are out there. You can let me show you a collection of books I have in here that other kids have liked. You can go to the library and the librarian will show you all the new books they have upstairs. I can get you a list of exciting and fun books that are in the library across the street. What do you say?

**Student:** I would say you can't show me any other books. These are the only books I read. All other books are boring.

My mind begins to wander at this point in the conversation. The next step will be me pulling out books, and the student informing me why each one won't work.

**There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza.**

Then fix it dear Henry.

With what?

With straw!

It's too long

Cut it!

With what?

An ax!

Too dull

Sharpen it!

With what?

Stone!

Too dry

Then wet it!

With what?

Water...

With what will I carry it?

A bucket!

But, there's a hole in the bucket...

“I can't. I only like that book (or I don't like any books at all, or I'll find a reason not to like every book you find for me).”

What do we as language arts and reading teachers do with that?

### **The Couch Has Eyes**

This year, the hole in the bucket experience is worse than than ever before. For starters, this is the first class I've ever had with no girls. Third period is comprised entirely of boys who vehemently hate reading. In this particular class I don't even have the ubiquitous *Wimpy Kid* readers. These students are coming to me with absolutely nothing to start with, not even a token beloved book they are fine with pulling out to read when they have to. Back in November I was fed up, and so were my boys. The only moments when they come alive are the moments when one of them jokes about the degree of boredom our intervention class has reached, and the others roll into raucous laughter. I've always prided myself on my bag of tricks and an ample supply of book ideas to get even the most reluctant readers off to reading heaven. Not in this class. My best ideas roll off these boys like rain off a bird dog. My attempted “joy of reading” conversations quickly turn stiff with rigor mortis.

Such distractions during reading time feel like trying to corral popping corn. Student eyes, not in books, eerily surround me from all corners of the room. Eyes peeking over a couch at me instead of in a book. Eyes on a phone hidden in a book. Glazed eyes staring into space instead of in a book. Eyes under a book over the face of a student who has fallen asleep on a beanbag actually happened in one case while I was busy with another student. I call on Joe\* PhoneEyes:

**Me:** Joe, that book isn't interesting to you.

**Joe:** (looking sullen) I'm fine with it.

**Me:** Last week you fell asleep with it, and now I catch you using it to hide your phone. It obviously does not have your attention.

**Joe:** (Cranky) No book has my attention. I told you, I hate reading. I want to just stay with this one. (I can sense anger brimming on the surface so I stop at this point.)

There is a sense of hopelessness in Joe's tone, and his attitude has more or less become the depressing epitome of the whole group of boys. By the time November rolls around, these fruitless conversations show me just how deeply the "hole in the bucket reasoning" is ingrained in these boys. They have no good feelings about reading, which goes hand in hand with the absence of an enjoyable reading experiences. They survive on excuses about why they can't read this or finish that in their ELA classes. I can't even draw on experiences with *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* to bring them back into the fold. I know I have to begin building a foundation for them, that self-selected novels are important, and that I need to turn our collective experiences into something that will work for everyone. I dig the children's classic *Kavik the Wolf Dog* out of the cupboard because dogs are a universal topic that most students have a fondness for and can relate to. I tell them we will begin to read it together, so I seat them all at one table and begin a daily routine of reading one chapter to them. I stop and ask them questions about their experiences with dogs.

One boy tells of his step-brother who had a wolf-dog "until he had to be put down because no vet would work with the dog and the dog was sick." He goes on to tell us that his step-brother referred to the dog as his "wolf-brother." Another boy, originally from Milwaukee, tells us how his dad just bought a pit bull terrier and is raising it to be a guard dog since he lives in a bad part of town. The *Kavik* story begins to bring out their stories. I try to read dramatically. I ask for volunteers to read. One by one the students are reading aloud. We talk about books. I tell them about other books. These days of a

budding interest in reading cover the span of about three weeks. The situation and the atmosphere of our class begins to change.

### **The Sun Also Rises**

The boys are beginning to get restless because the novelty of *Kavik* is beginning to wear off. *Kavik* is a classic but there is only so much that can be connected to dogs at the eighth- and ninth-grade level. I can tell they are looking for stories with more bite because I'm starting to hear the word "boring" crop up in their conversations with me again. They want to move on, and they know they will inevitably have to begin their self-selected novel. After a while, one by one, students start bringing their own books in or wander over to my shelves to give my books another chance. Two of my students are beginning readers, and one asks if he can listen to and read with an audio version of *Holes*. Another is interested in reading *Tiger Rising*, a book about a boy who loses his mother to cancer while dealing with bullying, a skin disease, and a tense relationship with his father. I remember Ivey and Johnston stressing that self-selected novels are an important part of reading instruction because of the interest students have in "edgy teen reading." Themes like teen suicide and its aftermath, cyber-bullying, cat-fishing, life on the streets in the big city, and dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner* continue to be winners among this age group. Eventually there comes a day when I'm left at the table by myself. Our foray into *Kavik* has done its job.

One day, as our principal passes by in the hall, he decides to drop in and chat with Billy,\* who lives in foster care. He finds Billy lying on the couch deeply absorbed in Gary Paulsen's *Guts*. When asked, he informs our principal that he's reading a book written by the man who wrote *Hatchet*. Billy had originally asked me if he could re-read *Hatchet*, but we had been having conversations about *Guts* when I saw him showing interest in it. Billy gives the principal background information on the book and shares that his lexile has gone up more than 100 points in three months. It is a shining moment for Billy when our principal, looking impressed, praises him and tells him to keep up the good work. He is able to show his expertise to someone whose last conversation with

him was probably over a discipline problem. In the months prior to this encounter, Billy and I were constantly out of step with each other. Obviously things have changed. After I began reading aloud to the boys, things become low key enough for them to also practice reading aloud and discussing the reading. Many of them are gaining self-confidence as they navigate the world of literature. Now they are branching off into their own explorations. Joe begins reading and completes *Code Talker*. Next he begins *Lord of the Flies* and completes it for his ninth-grade English class. He passes the tests and finds his academic successes and accomplishments a new source of pride.

Thomas and Dakota, who still feel there aren't any books for them, respond to an idea I received from Ferlazzo's (2014) interview with Routman, who suggests that they "write their own books." They decided to try their hand at writing on Google Docs, and their books have been growing on a daily basis. Over the course of their writing, they've been finding that they want to read for information to include in their book, which has led them to look up and read articles on their interests. Thomas inadvertently spots a YA book entitled *Lost in Space: The Incredible Journey of Apollo 13*, so he takes a break from writing and begins to read.

Devonte, whose life is sports, makes a connection with author Walter Dean Myers. Usually my students will go with Myers' books dealing with basketball and life in the streets, but Devonte finds himself drawn to Myers' biographical novel *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali*. Billy, who in two months went up 167 lexile points, begins *The Maze Runner* series and is already on book two. When Billy learns his classmates are writing books, he tells me that they could learn from his bad experiences with the law and how he is trying to get his life back together, so he begins writing himself. He asks if I can locate *Hatchet* for him because he wants to see how Paulson begins Paul's story so he can get an idea on how to begin his own. At the end of March, Billy goes up 50 more lexile points. Our principal has offered to give us money to publish the books on Lulu.com when they get them finished, which excites our classroom authors even more.

My surly, uncooperative boys are making great advances. They have also become more sociable and civil. Can I credit their success with the self-selected novel for this?

Actually, educators have found that identification with characters and issues in teen reading can increase reading sociability (Ivey, 2014; Myers, 2015). Dakota and Thomas ask me if they can spend the last five minutes of each class checking in with each other in order to share information and read to each other the writing they have done. One of my boys has registered an increase from 0 to 457 in his second lexile test of the year. He is no longer a beginning reader.

### **Dearly Beloved, We Are Gathered Here Today to Get Through This Thing Called the “Reading” Life**

Part of the literacy dance, when it comes to dealing with students who fear it, is keeping it real. When you keep your inner life as teacher/learner hidden from your students, you are a fake. When you don’t admit there are books you dislike or find boring, you are a fake. When you don’t admit that sometimes you don’t understand what you are reading the first time you read it either, or that you actually have to apply comprehension strategies to understand boring books, you are a fake.

Students can smell a fake a mile away, and they *will* make you (and consequently themselves) pay when you lose their trust. You can feel the tension when you have a room full of boys faced with having to concentrate on doing something they feel bad at everyday for the rest of the year. Boys don’t roll that way. Their sense of control and pride is important to them, and if they lose that sense, they become angry and stressed. Self-select novel or not, if a student doesn’t feel he has the ability to learn and grow, he is not going to want to waste his time trying to read if he feels it’s hopeless.

I can tell when I’m bad at defusing the tension and helping the students feel in control just by looking at the folders and binders they use in my class. The more angry and frustrated they become, the more they tend to stab, rip apart, scribble on, and poke holes in the folders I keep in my room. One of my goals last year was to research and study the best way to encourage a growth mindset (students understanding they can always learn and improve) rather than a fixed mindset (students feeling they were born either smart or not and there is no way to change that) (Dweck, 2015). This, along with

learning the best way to create a sense of agency. To this end, I have learned that I must consistently reveal myself as a learner to my own students. Through trial and error, I have learned the necessity of talking to them at length and in a repetitive fashion about how I've approached boring books. I reveal stories about and readily admit to my own failures (Nicklaus, 2016). I share books I like and don't like. I talk to them. I let them know the moments when they have something to teach me. They talk to me. They talk to each other. They begin positive self-talk among themselves.

The truth of it is, I have to start from scratch at the beginning of each year. What works one year doesn't necessarily work the exact same way the next year. It takes me a while to get into the rhythm and dance with each new set of students. Sometimes it take me a few months. Each group brings with them their own stories, their own fears, their own backgrounds. All of them together create a new chemistry and energy that I must learn to choreograph in order for their experience with me to be a positive and fruitful one.

In *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2010) speaks of the need for teachers to keep their sense of self when no one wants to do their dance. In regard to the difficulties involved in getting students interested in their literacy projects, trying to get into step with them is its own dance. It's a dance whose choreography involves getting into step with the students instead of expecting them to fall into line. The dancer needs to recognize that fears are hidden behind smart remarks. It's knowing that instead of guiding the student's hip-hop routine into an elegant waltz, we may suddenly find ourselves lurching a Virginia reel back into a Nae Nae. The failed conversations we had with students are not truly failures, rather they're a first step in a choreography of fresh, new, ongoing successes which will lead to compelling literacy possibilities and a stronger sense of self. The new perspectives they may gain from reading about the lives of others may be just what it takes to change fear into personal power. The dance is no longer just the teacher's or the student's. It has become a remix containing the best of both.

Here are strategies that will help get boys out of a fixed mindset of inevitable failure and into a dynamic mindset, thereby creating readers who not only know what they like to read, but are also able to discuss what they read:

1. **Survey your boys' interests and talk about them.** Keep the conversations going so you continue to learn more. What makes this student excited about life? Is it a sport? hunting and fishing? the skatepark? gaming?
2. **Put the self-selected novel on hold if you need to.** Decide between doing a series of book talks in a classroom where you have varied interests, or read aloud one book if you know you have students with similar interests. Either way you will win because students will be drawn in by your reading and the resulting conversations from the topics you choose. Make sure that the books you share are ones that you truly love so you can allow the students to feel your joy and enthusiasm over the text.
3. **Ask librarians to present book trailers on the SMART Board.** Better yet, have them help you set up "Speed dating with books," during which students go from table to table and read different books during an allotted time. They keep track of their favorite books with a tally sheet. They end up with a list of titles they may want to "date" (read) later.
4. **Keep checking in and interacting with the students after they begin reading on their own.** How is it going? Is it still interesting? Any part that is difficult to understand?
5. **Give students permission to skim over boring parts.** This may be up for debate in the reading education world but hear me out: Students have often felt they had to read every word in a book. What a misery for them, particularly when they found the books boring or were poor readers in the first place. Many non-readers have been tortured in this fashion. Is it better for them to see reading as synonymous with torture, or can we bend a little and allow them certain liberties and freedoms?

6. **Allow students to skip around nonfiction books like *Ripley's Believe It or Not* and collections of stories.** This is related to number five on this list, and for the same reason. We want them to experience the joy of reading. If they find parts that are interesting and are finally reading, more power to them!
7. **Give credit to non-readers for the reading they *are* doing as they try to find a book they think they will like.** They are still reading! Remind them of this when they are reading excerpts and book jackets to find the perfect self-select.
8. **Read along with them.** Read aloud to them, have them read to you. This is the way conversations about the book will get started, along with building confidence and trust levels. Let your own teaching style and interests shine, and watch your dance with each student develop.
9. **Create casual, fun reading experiences.** I make and can salsa every fall, and we have “Salsa Friday” when the boys sit around, eat chips, and read to promote recreational reading.



When we give boys the right environment and encourage and celebrate each tiny step we are putting in place a foundation that will enable them to eventually choose books that will bring enjoyment and growth for them in many areas of their reading and their interaction with reading. We also experience growth that will better enable us to cultivate and build relationships with students. The relationships we foster provide the knowledge and tools we need to help them build self-esteem in their reading.

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