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INTRODUCTION



What would you do if you could answer the question, “Why do kids stop reading by the end of elementary school?” Gallagher (2010) brought this to our attention in his seminal text, *Readicide*. What if we could find the answer:

- ▶ Not by looking at cognitive abilities, but affect—the child’s physical response, emotions, and perceptions—rather than by traditional means, like reading comprehension scores?
- ▶ With compassion—through a long-term investment with readers and by using relationships, or the interpersonal bridge, to rectify self-perception and build competence and mastery so students become truly independent, lifelong readers because reading matters to them?
- ▶ By questioning our practices—what if the answers to why kids stop reading don’t come in test scores but merely by looking into their eyes and listening to their story?

I found myself asking these questions about 7 years ago after life forced me into a deep self-reflection. When I began studying books like *Shame: The Power of Caring*, by renowned shame researcher Kaufman (1993), I saw more than myself on the pages, I saw my maturing readers. My students, subjected to traditional reading pedagogy, manifested the shame-based behaviors I was reading in those pages. I continued to read, drawing links between shame research and education literature about reading instruction. The connections were alarming. Following years of self-reflection and instructional adaptations, I developed my own theories, many of which are presented in this text.

This book is an attempt to reconsider and reexamine reading joy, reading achievement, and affective processes. It is intended to help educators understand and implement the practices I discovered that mentor students through a process of becoming engaged in their reading development. In this book, educators can consider the isolation or abandonment readers may feel as a result of many current practices

in the teaching of reading. What I am talking about here is shame—the internalized sense of inadequacy, faultiness, contempt, rejection, and the loss of personal integrity—those readers may feel. By the end of this book, educators will know how to lift students out of the dejection they may associate with learning to read.

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In a world consumed by data-driven practices and the quest for external affirmation promoted by social media, students are more vulnerable than ever to “rejecting” themselves in favor of developing an appearance they believe is more favorable to others. Yet from the research and our knowledge of child development, we know the driving forces that support maturing children are competency, agency, and self-efficacy. In other words, students need and deserve a strong sense of self that allows them to develop resilience or embrace the “gift” of who they are from within. This includes reading instruction that promotes a healthy sense of self. We have an opportunity, today, to reverse a trend in literacy education where the child is the receiver of teaching and is “told” who they are. We can embrace this goal of self-efficacy and actualization and truly help our students become lifelong readers with a strong sense of who they are as readers.

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How Can You Approach This Book?

Up front, I will say that some of the content in this book will challenge you. What is presented here comes from actual classroom experiences. These stories are from a variety of settings including

classrooms, intervention settings, and summer programs. These environments are rural, suburban, and urban communities in which I lived and worked. Every single teaching environment I've worked in was 50% free- and reduced-school lunch or higher. Most of my students live within the profound impacts of poverty, be it financial, emotional, or generational (Payne, 1998). The stories I share are tales of the errors I made and the shifts I needed to make to encourage students to assume reading into their lives. I am hoping by sharing my vulnerability, it will help you outgrow your current self as an educator.

However, some of the terms used might cause you to recoil a bit. I don't like to use labels. However, at times you will see terms such as *struggling reader* or *dumb*. These are the definitions readers apply to themselves, not the labels I place on them. I cannot change the internalizations or self-perceptions that students bring with them into the classroom. I can only help show them a more promising future where they have the tools and the power to change their own narrative. Sometimes that means I have to forsake agendas like data-driven aspirations to "roll up my sleeves" and put the reader before myself.

As you read each chapter, I hope you will find yourself on a journey. First, we start with what *shame* means. From there we learn about the reader's narrative through assessments. Next, we look at ways to bring students into reading, how to manage their reading lives, and how to help them develop a reading process. Finally, we look at data-based interventions and how to invite students to define their reading legacy through writing about reading.

If at any point you find yourself challenged or overwhelmed, please take time for yourself. It took me nearly a decade of self-reflection and baby steps just to reach this point. I encourage you to pause and reflect when you need to. Just remember, this book is based on what I've experienced in nearly 20 years of teaching. I'm sharing my perspective to support your classroom, to help you to continue evolving as an educator at a time when students and readers need us most.

At the end of each chapter is a section titled Reflect and Act. The purpose of this section is to give you an opportunity to process what you have read. As we know, shifting our practice takes reflection and time. The great news about teaching is that every day we can start fresh. Within the framework of this conversation, I encourage you to think about what can be done tomorrow, or next week, or even what you will do differently in the coming school year.