

Putting the “Shop” in Reading Workshop: Building Reading Stamina in a Ninth-Grade Literacy Class in a Bronx Vocational High School

The author describes an ethnographic study in which a skillful teacher builds relationships with her students that help them to develop literacy expertise without losing their identities.

For many teachers of middle school and high school, the greatest challenge they face in trying to help struggling readers improve their skills can be students' self-perception. When young people do not see themselves as members of the “literacy club” (Smith 37), it is not just a simple matter of persuading them that becoming a fluent reader is worth the effort. Some students take a deliberate and public stance distancing themselves from the culture and all of the behaviors associated with school, from carrying books to doing homework to participating in class discussions. Convincing such students that they can do well in school without losing their identities requires patience and understanding, and an ability to build relationships in which students feel understood and cared for. What follows is an account of what it can look like when a teacher has the skill and the passion to be able to establish such an atmosphere.

This article describes an ethnographic study of a ninth-grade literacy classroom in Urban High School, a vocational or Career and Technical Education (CTE) school located in the South Bronx in New York City. While the school's Automotive and Building Trades departments are successful by many standards, providing impressive professional internships in the automotive and building trades for many seniors who do well in both their shop and their academic classes, a significant number of students fail the English Language Arts Regents Exam and fail to meet graduation requirements.

Students attend Urban for a variety of reasons. While there are some who choose this school

because of an interest in automotive or building trades, other students have said that they were encouraged by their school counselors to apply to Urban because they lack a strong academic record and might not be accepted by a more selective high school. Despite a high level of technical literacy required to comprehend trade manuals and textbooks, vocational schools tend to be plagued by a perception that their academic programs lack rigor. When students who struggle with traditional literacy are steered into these schools, low academic achievement becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Indeed, according to the 2008–2009 New York State School Report Card, only 26% of students at Urban passed the Comprehensive English Regents exam with a grade of 55 or above.

Mike Rose points out that “Vocational courses still tend to be the domain of working-class students and students of color” (169). For most students at Urban, learning the trades that are taught there holds the potential for significant socioeconomic advancement; failure to pass academic literacy benchmarks can hold them back from advancing in or even from entering shop classes. Ironically, students who might come to reading and writing *through the channel* of a hands-on skill are held back from the opportunities to do so if they do not first master their academic class work.

Hands-On Engagement

As part of a grant shared among several CTE high schools in the city, Urban High School hired the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP)

to conduct onsite professional development in the school. NYCWP sent me as a teacher-consultant to work with teachers and form a professional development study group.

During the course of facilitating the study group I got to know the participating teachers and visited their classrooms along with several others. In the study group we discussed the challenges of providing the structure and support some students need to engage with texts in a more than perfunctory manner, to be willing to stay with reading materials that may not be easily accessible. We also analyzed some of the technical texts students had to read for their shop classes in an effort to grasp what it was that allowed the adolescents to work with these highly technical textbooks, and why there seemed to be so little carry-over of these skills into their academic subjects.

One of the English language arts teachers in the group, Jennifer, invited me to visit her classroom. After observing her teach several classes, I began to notice that she seemed to have set up her

classroom to allow students to approach their work in her class using some of the same rituals and strategies as they do in their shop classes. Students move freely about the room with a sense of purpose. They select their own books and read independently, responding in their notebooks and sharing their responses with the teacher or with a peer. They know where to find

the materials they need for the task at hand, and they do so efficiently. Such a productive atmosphere requires a great deal of planning and classroom community building. When she told me that all the students in the class were ninth graders who had entered the school having achieved the lowest possible score (level one) on the eighth-grade ELA exam, it became clear that this teacher had mastered valuable strategies that could be shared with colleagues.

As Jennifer and I worked together in the study group and talked about her classroom, she invited me to conduct a formal ethnographic research study of her classroom.

The first order of the day is independent reading. Each student has a plastic bag containing his or her folder, reading log, a pen, a highlighter, and a book that he or she has chosen.

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Jennifer's Classroom

The ninth-grade literacy students in Jennifer's class arrive a few at a time. This is their first period in school, so it can take a while before all the seats are filled. There is a second teacher, Anne, present because this is an inclusion or cooperative team teaching (CTT) class. Anne and Jennifer are in their seventh year of team-teaching. In CTT classes as many as half of the students in the class are classified as special education students, but in this room, there is no distinguishing the students with special needs from the mainstream students. They are all treated according to the same academic and social standards, all expected to complete the same assignments, and all interact with both teachers. The support each student receives to help work toward these goals is based on their individual needs as learners. The pedagogy in this classroom is shaped by Jennifer's deep understanding of literacy practices and supported by both teachers' attentiveness to their students' needs and behaviors.

The classroom is ringed with desk-chairs. Bulletin boards are hung with student work and with teacher-made posters describing successful reading and writing strategies. Half of the large bulletin board is used by a math teacher, who shares the room. In the front of the room next to the chalkboard there is a large bookcase with glass doors that are always open when class is in session. The case is filled mostly with young adult novels. Taped to the glass doors are student-written book

reviews on colored index cards. The glass is barely visible beneath the rainbow of cards carefully filled out by students with headings like “This Book is Hot!” There is also a row of milk crates along the front wall of the classroom containing books for the students’ use.

The first order of the day is independent reading. Each student has a plastic bag containing his or her folder, reading log, a pen, a highlighter, and a book that he or she has chosen. Jennifer refers to these bags as the students’ “tool kits.” There is some noise at first, but calm settles over the students quickly as they are immersed in their books. One student has finished his book so he goes to the large bookcase and begins browsing. Jennifer walks over to him and asks: “Are you interested in some realistic fiction or are you off that now?” As Jennifer steers the student toward some book choices she thinks he might like, it is obvious to anyone listening that Jennifer is intimately acquainted with current young adult literature, and she has paid close attention to her students’ reading habits. Many of the students in this class had never finished a book before this school year.

The class consists of a total of 27 students: 23 boys and 4 girls. A student named Marisol is deeply absorbed in reading *Push*, Sapphire’s compelling and controversial novel on which the film *Precious* is based. In an interview Marisol said that she and another girl, who was equally absorbed in *The Lovely Bones*, had asked their parents’ permission to take the subway downtown during their recent February vacation so that they could visit the young adult section of the Mid-Manhattan Library. The independent reading program in this class has evidently changed the way some of these students see themselves. “I never thought of myself as a reader before,” said Danny, a soft-spoken boy with a ponytail. “I never even thought about reading. Now I read all the time at home. I ask for books for Christmas and my birthday.”

How Is the Independent Reading Program Structured?

Students choose their own books from the abundant classroom library with the help of the teachers when needed. Jennifer knows and loves young adult literature, and literature in general, and she

pays close attention to her students. This enables her to draw students into the “readers’ club” by engaging each student in lively conversations about books. A girl looks up from the book she is reading, looks at Jennifer with wide eyes, groans, and points to her book. “I can’t believe this!” she says. Jennifer grins: “I know. Are you getting mad yet?” The student nods vehemently and plunges back into her book. During this half hour or so of independent reading she will engage in several conversations like this with individual students. Students begin to accumulate shared reading experiences in this class, embodying the often-used phrase *a community of learners*.

It is a lively cross between book club and workshop, featuring ninth graders who are almost all boys, assembled in a 100-year-old high school in the South Bronx.

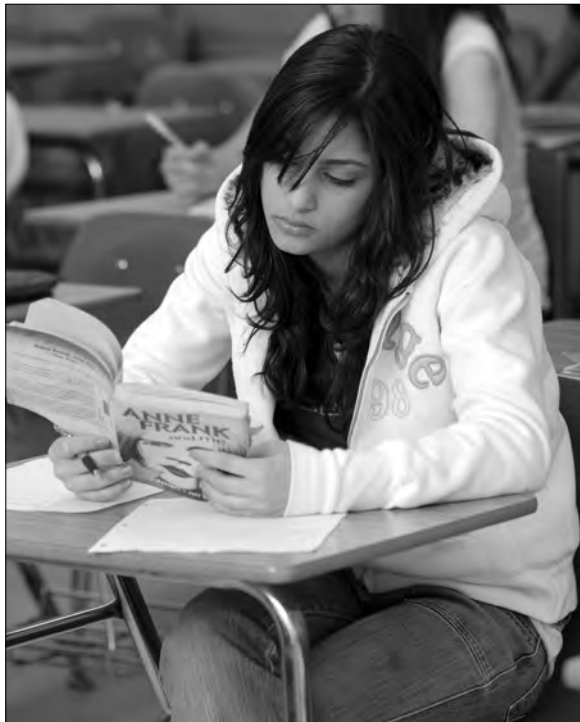
With most of the 27 heads bowed over books, it can be easy to forget that this is a class in which most of the students had never read an entire book before this year. The kind of coaching Jennifer offers makes the daunting task of reading manageable for these students. She talks with them about building their stamina for reading, a little at a time. Jack, whose desk is not coincidentally right next to Jennifer’s, has a hard time staying focused on the best of days. The first time I observed the class Jack was playing with his pencils, calling out to classmates, doing practically anything but reading. Jennifer leaned over and said to him quietly, “I’ll bet you can read for two minutes without stopping.” He nodded his head, and she looked at her watch. “OK, go!” Jack dutifully read for two minutes, and Jennifer congratulated him. The timing of Jack’s reading became a daily ritual between student and teacher that helped him gradually find a way to participate in the work of the class, with the intention of moving him toward self-management as slowly as that needed to happen. A month later, she said, “I think you’re ready for five minutes now.” As she became busy moving around the room conferring with

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other students, she forgot about timing Jack’s reading. Twenty minutes later, he looked up from his book. “Miss, was that five minutes yet?” When she told him that he had in fact read for 20, he beamed.

Direct Reading Instruction

At the end of the independent reading period Jennifer tells the students to “come up out of their books.” Some of them groan and lift their heads slowly as if from a trance. They have been deeply absorbed in reading. Today the class will begin reading Gary Paulsen’s *Nightjohn*, a story about a runaway slave who returns to the plantation in the middle of the night to secretly teach other slaves to read and write. In preparation for this, Jennifer prearranged a “gallery walk” consisting of pictures and quotes relating to slavery. The students circulated around the room with sticky notes writing comments and questions, which they discussed afterward. Today they will begin reading the book together, which means that Jennifer reads passages aloud as the students follow along in their own copies, and then the students take the books home and reread and comment on those passages



Thompson-McClellan Photography

in their journals. By way of introduction, Jennifer warns students that the book contains some scenes of brutality.

“Sometimes that kind of violence makes people uncomfortable,” she explains, “and it may make you feel like laughing or making jokes. I just want you to understand that if you laugh or act inappropriately, you are dishonoring the ancestors who lived through these things.” Needless to say, nobody laughed at any of the violence in the book. It was a moment that vividly illustrates the notion that effective classroom management is situational and connected to engagement with the curriculum and relationships developed in the teaching and learning process.

As the days and weeks proceeded (the class spent about three weeks reading the book and studying its historical context) Jennifer read sections of the book aloud in class, followed by guided but open discussions. For homework, students took the same passages home to read and comment on in their journals. Some students read ahead, while others were able to keep up because of the support of hearing the text read aloud before having to read it on their own. These practices allowed the struggling readers (most of the students in the class) to move forward in their reading and gain the confidence to read independently. The emphasis was always toward demystifying reading and writing to place the agency in students’ hands. This was accomplished by explaining to students in clear and honest terms where they were as readers, what was getting in their way (based on individual conferences and assessments) and what they needed to do in order to improve. Many of the students in this class entered with a skill level in the early-to-middle elementary years. They could decode words but had little to no practice in comprehending anything beyond literal meaning in texts. Many of the students were English language learners, some with irregular formal schooling up to that point. What they needed was daily practice with patient and skilled support—the steadying hand that gave them the confidence to keep working at the task. The most essential key to improving as readers and writers was stamina, Jennifer would explain. Once the mechanics of reading are understood, if you can stay with the task for gradually increasing lengths of time, you will eventually achieve mastery. This

was the triumph of Jack's ability to go from 2 to 20 minutes lost in a book. It represented a turning point in his perception of himself as a reader, which would lead to broader changes in his life. It was also what allowed the other students in their class to savor for the first time in their lives the experience of being deeply immersed in a book, of caring about what happens next and thinking about the book in between periods of reading it. The ability to interact within a community of peers and supportive adults also reinforced the "readers' club" atmosphere of Jennifer's class. The conversations that students in Jennifer's class were having around books represented possibilities for ways of being and interacting in the world.

The Community Enters the Classroom

By their own accounts and my observations, most of these ninth-grade students turned from nonreaders to readers who organized trips downtown to the library and asked for books as Christmas and birthday presents. This is a success by any measure, and one that must be due at least in large part to the relationships both Jennifer and Anne had thoughtfully and carefully cultivated in this class. The same relationships that led the students in this class to trust that their teachers had their best interest at heart also allowed for a community in which life and learning went on even when it would have seemed impossible otherwise. The teacher-student interactions that I witnessed were the embodiment of Nel Noddings's notion of "relational caring" (xvii) in which the caring teacher acknowledges and attends to the needs of students. Even beyond this, however, was how each teacher established a way of relating to students so that everyone in the class—teachers and students—became absolutely integral to the emotional life as well as the intellectual and work lives of the community. This was particularly important during this school year, which began with a heartbreaking loss.

My entry into the school for this research project was delayed for a few weeks as the school was reeling from the murder of a student in Jennifer's class—a victim of the gang violence that is part of these students' daily reality. He was a kind, friendly boy, and well liked. For the rest of the school year, a wall of the classroom was covered with the stu-

dents' letters and essays to and about Orlando. For more than a month after the incident, the subdued students would settle into their morning routine of independent reading, and the one who handed out the "tool kits" would place the book Orlando had been reading on the desk where he used to sit, along with a few saints' medals and a set of tiny "worry dolls" and a few other small mementos placed there by some of the students. Eventually one student asked the other students if they minded if he read Orlando's book, and they consented. What was so striking in this story was not just that the work of school went on in spite of the tragedy, but that the literacy acts conducted in that classroom were so clearly at the center of the community that was built there. Reading and writing in the community of that class helped the students heal.

"I'm Walking, Miss!"


Three years after this study began, it is graduation day and Jennifer and Anne are standing outside the school. Jack walks over and embraces them both.

He is in his cap and gown, about a foot taller than he had been in ninth grade and sporting metal braces on his teeth. He excitedly explains to Jennifer and Anne how their class made him a reader and taught him how to be a student. "I remembered what you said about stamina and I kept on building, and now I'm walking, Miss!" he said, referring to the day's graduation ceremony. "And not only that . . . I'm going

away to college in the fall!" This was a long way to come for a boy whose greatest academic achievement three years earlier was to read for 20 minutes.

Jack's success, and the success of his classmates who graduated alongside him, makes abundantly clear the importance of having teachers care about him. Jack's teachers knew his potential and acknowledged his limitations. Rather than setting the stage for academic failure, however, the acknowledgment of those limitations became the

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staging platform from which Jack could continue to build stamina. Jack's success is emblematic of much of the success in this reading workshop course. 

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