

Teachers as Readers: Examining the Personal Reading Lives of English Educators

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the personal reading lives of four English teachers, providing insight into how teachers engage with texts both inside and outside of the classroom. Using participant-generated artifacts, reading journals, teaching artifacts, interviews, group meetings, and virtual discussion boards, the study uncovers the diverse reading habits, practices, and motivations of these English teachers. Findings reveal that teachers' reading choices are influenced by personal experiences, professional demands, and continually evolve over time. The study suggests that when teachers reflect on their reading histories and experiences, they gain deeper insight into how they view their students as readers, helping them foster meaningful student engagement with books and potentially inspiring more authentic and positive classroom reading experiences.

KEYWORDS

reading; reading motivation; teachers as readers; English language arts; adolescent literacy

Several years ago, a fellow English teacher poked his head in my classroom and said, “Hey, I saw you’re interested in reading Murakami.” I nodded, realizing he must have noticed the recent additions to my “want to read” list on Goodreads. When I asked if he had read any of Murakami’s work, our conversation unfolded into a lively 15-minute discussion about Murakami’s distinctive style and our experiences reading Japanese literature. By the time he walked away, I felt intellectually energized, eager to read the latest Murakami novel, and already looking forward to our next literary exchange.

It was a small moment—just a casual hallway chat—but one that left a lasting impression. One might assume that in a profession built around reading, discussions about books would be a natural part of daily life; yet my 14 years as an English teacher suggest otherwise. Even in spaces lined with literature posters and classroom libraries, conversations about personal reading lives don’t always happen organically.

This experience led me to wonder: What does research tell us about the reading habits of teachers? How much do English teachers read? What do they read? How often do they share what they’ve read? And why does a strong reading life even matter? At a time when the value of reading—and the role of books in schools—is increasingly debated (Ingraham, 2018; Voice of America, 2024), these questions, understanding how teachers engage with books in their personal lives, feel more urgent than ever.

Literature Review

Research suggests that teachers’ personal reading lives shape how they introduce, discuss, and value books in the classroom (Daisey, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; McCarthy & Moje, 2002). This research appears even more meaningful given that, as students move into adolescence, their

disengagement with books becomes more pronounced (Webber et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2020). When thinking about how to engage students with books, English teachers could start by reflecting on what motivates them to read.

Another factor in considering the reading life of an English teacher is the ever-evolving and subjective nature of the English curriculum. This raises broader questions about the types of texts and lessons teachers should create based on their views and assumptions about the goals of reading in their classroom. Luke (2004) suggests that the very notion of “what counts as English has become somewhat unclear” (p. 88). Luke also questions, “how we might reinvent (English) in relation to an understanding of its own social and cultural complexities and dynamics” (p. 87). A teacher’s reading habits and history influence their perception of what English should look like in their classroom. It shapes what counts as a text and what texts students should or should not be reading.

In a climate where teachers are teaching fewer longer works (Voice of America, 2024), what role do books play in the English classroom? How do teachers think about the canon? What is the place for young adult literature in the classroom? What are realistic expectations for students as readers? How do teachers balance positive experiences with texts while also preparing students for standardized assessments? These are just a few of the seemingly endless questions that an examination of a teacher’s reading life may help address.

Insights into these questions may also influence pedagogical decision-making around texts within a teacher’s classroom. There exists a wealth of research around the best practices for teaching texts and guiding students to become better readers (Beach et al., 2016; Jago, 2019; Kittle, 2024; Styslinger, 2017). Still, it is unclear if teachers themselves follow the recommended best practices in their teaching practices and in their own reading lives. Research suggests that teachers who are avid readers are more likely to utilize best practices in their literacy instruction and, in turn, are more likely to motivate their students to read (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; McKool & Gespass, 2009; Merga, 2016). Recent quantitative research by Griffin and Mindrila (2024) identified distinct profiles of teacher reading motivation among over 1,000 U.S. educators, revealing that while many teachers demonstrate high intrinsic motivation to read, others report lower engagement due to diminished reading self-efficacy or undervaluing the importance of reading. These findings underscore the need to examine not only what teachers read, but why they read, and how these motivational patterns may influence classroom practice. This article seeks to investigate the following question:

What are the reading practices of in-service secondary English teachers, and how do these practices influence how they approach texts and reading in the classroom?

Theoretical Framework

This research is situated within a sociocultural perspective of literacy, drawing on Street’s (2003) assertion that literacy is “always embedded in social practices” (p. 78). Reading texts is one form of social practice, and the ways one reads and interprets texts are shaped by larger cultural contexts that influence one’s understanding.

Reading is an event occurring in a specific time and place, involving a transaction between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1994). This transactional theory of reading highlights the reciprocal relationship between the reader and the text, situated within the historical and cultural contexts of both. As a result, the contexts of both texts and readers evolve over time, influencing the meaning-making process in this transaction.

Together, Street's (2003) sociocultural perspective and Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory support viewing reading as a social act, shaped not only by texts and contexts but also by the social roles and lived experiences of the reader. Specifically, looking at the literacy lives of teachers, Gomez (2009) explores how they engage with texts through the lens of their relationships, professional identities, and lived experiences. These factors influence not only what is read in their personal and professional lives but also how meaning is made, reinforcing the idea that reading is an evolving practice shaped by readers, texts, and the contexts in which they are situated.

Methods

This article is part of a larger participatory action research (PAR) study. While researchers have defined and taken up action research in a variety of ways, most agree that this type of research involves "inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 3). PAR assumes that research questions do not have simple, easily answerable responses to the research question and require a problem that takes long-term and persistent effort to explore (Lawson et al., 2015). PAR also acknowledges the idea of shared expertise, recognizing that knowledge is not solely produced by the researcher but is co-constructed with participants. Using a PAR design allowed these in-service teachers, over the course of four months, to explore their reading histories and practices, reflect on these experiences in a group setting, and consider how these insights might influence their own and their students' relationships with reading.

Participants

For PAR to be effective, participants must be genuinely invested in the topic and the knowledge being generated, as Lawson et al. (2015) emphasize that it relies on "'local stakeholders' genuine participation in knowledge generation intertwined with real-world problem solving" (p. 15). Using purposive sampling (Salkind, 2012), this study recruited in-service English teachers from a previous pilot project who, as "local stakeholders," were interested in exploring the role of reading in their lives and classrooms. The "real-world problem" is the growing disengagement with books among adolescents (Webber et al., 2024; Wilkinson et al., 2020). English teachers participated by reflecting on their own reading lives, with the belief that fostering an appreciation of reading in students may first require understanding what motivates them as readers.

This article focuses on four of those participants: Robert (all names are pseudonyms), a male high school English teacher in Illinois; George, a male high school English teacher in Maryland; Cheryl, a female educator who, at the time of this study, had transitioned to a literacy coach position in Maryland after teaching high school English for over 20 years; and James, a male middle school Language Arts teacher in Colorado.

Data Collection

Data for this article consists of participant-created reading identity artifacts. Reading identity artifacts serve as a creative method for encouraging teachers to share insights into their reading lives. The creation of such artifacts can be useful when attempting to express something as abstract as a reading identity (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; Sroka et al., 2022). Participants also submitted teaching artifacts related to reading (course syllabi, lesson plans, worksheets). Throughout the study, participants contributed to an asynchronous discussion board on Slack. In addition to these reading identity artifacts, teaching artifacts, and discussion board, seven 90-

minute biweekly group meetings were conducted over the course of 4 months focusing on different aspects of reading and teaching lives. Two semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with each participant, one midway through the four-month period and one at the end, to follow up on topics discussed in the group meetings and to explore the submitted artifacts.

Participants also kept reading journals. Defining what counts as reading for their reading journals, and in general, proved increasingly difficult as the study progressed. Most participants preferred an inclusive approach, with one stating, “let’s include it all,” an openness that echoed Eaglestone and Field’s (2015) view of reading literature as “not something that can be defined but as something that overflows or escapes from any attempt to limit it or put it into a box” (p. 54). However, through data analysis, it became clear that participants had varying and sometimes inconsistent notions of what constitutes reading. For instance, podcasts, ranging from story-centered to news-centered content, were discussed as an acceptable form of reading. However, only one participant included podcasts in their reading journal data. These responses revealed a dissonance between what participants said and did, pointing again to reading being a social act, where even what counts as reading is constantly being shaped by readers, texts, and contexts. (Gomez, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1994, Street, 2003).

Data Analysis

All data were collected and uploaded to NVivo software for organization and coding. For coding, Saldaña’s (2016) first and second cycle coding were utilized. In the first cycle, in vivo coding was applied to capture participants’ precise language and “honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106). Given the PAR design, it was essential to capture their language when discussing their reading beliefs and experiences.

Trustworthiness was established throughout the study by fostering positive rapport and creating an open environment that encouraged authentic sharing during collaborative meetings (Herr & Anderson, 2015). To enhance internal validity, multiple data sources were incorporated, and member checking was done during individual interviews, where participants reviewed transcripts and analyses. These strategies strengthened the credibility of both the data and findings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Findings

The findings profile the reading lives of four English teachers, exploring their reading habits, beliefs, and the evolving nature of their literary experiences. A common thread among these educators is their belief that reading is inherently social, whether through reading alongside others, recommending texts, or engaging in discussions about books. Central to their reading practices is the importance of choice; each teacher selects texts based on their immediate needs, curiosities, and desires, whether for knowledge, escape, personal growth, or connection with self and others. These profiles also underscore the importance of reflecting on one’s reading life, highlighting how such reflection can inform both personal reading choices and professional practices in the classroom.

Robert

I always kind of chose things to read that I was interested in, but also that others were interested in.

Robert's reading journal further demonstrates his eagerness to engage with and discuss his reading. Spanning 35 pages, his journal, significantly longer than those of any other participant, captures not only the books he was reading but also the personal connections he was making with them, as can be seen in the following journal entry (see Figure 2). Robert, dialoguing with the text, writes about his personal experiences and preferences for learning about education history. He also brings in his professional identity, discussing how the texts apply to his teaching and the power of storytelling. Overall, this entry demonstrates a reader who is constantly in dialogue with what he is reading through his background knowledge, past experiences, and professional identity.

Figure 2: Robert's Journal Entry April 28th, 2020

Tuesday, April 28, 2020	<i>Should We Burn Babar?</i> <i>Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories</i> by Herbert Kohl	Essay: The Good Old Days. I Was There. Where Was They? A Fictional History of Public Education in the United States
I took two courses on education history for my BA and MA, both of which, education and history, are subjects I love. Somehow, both classes were some of the lamest courses I've ever taken. Kohl's reimagining of the history of our educational system, using generations of a fictional family in a small town, brought the decisions to life and could form the basis for an entire education history course. All that would be needed would be footnotes of articles that relate that could then be read. Again, I think this really illustrates the power of storytelling and reinvigorates me to place even more emphasis on this in my classes and find ways to make this come alive even though e-learning. I'll admit that some of Kohl's work reads dated and has some contradictions. Still, I feel an odd sense that Kohl is a "kindred spirit," and I wish I had read his work earlier in my career. I, too, believe that teaching criticism, the earlier the better, makes for richer, more authentic discussion. I, too, believe that literacy is a social endeavor grounded in storytelling, which is what makes us human. I, too, believe in the messiness of history and literature in the movement toward a more progressive education. I know Babar brought me to this book (I'm a fan of Babar, regardless of the problematic plot and characterization), but I left feeling somewhat vindicated in much of my educational philosophy, for better or for worse.		

Robert's reading life is also deeply intertwined with his local context, as he actively seeks out texts that reflect Chicago's literary and cultural landscape. His involvement in the Young Authors Book Project (see Figure 3) demonstrated a deliberate effort to explore works by Chicago authors, both to deepen his own understanding of the city and to better connect with his students. In his journal, he noted how this experience led him to "consciously start seeking out texts that were written by authors with a Chicago or Illinois aesthetic" to fill gaps in his knowledge.

Figure 3: Robert's Journal Entry April 3rd, 2020

Tuesday, April 3, 2020	<i>Algren: A Life</i> by Wisniewski	Chapters 1–2
Beginning last year, I started to take an increased interest in Chicago authors, specifically in response to the Young Authors Book Project, with which I had the opportunity to work with my freshmen students in collaboration with 826CHI, and for which they returned again this year for my Creative Writing elective. The writers-in-residence there are really fantastic, and through the writing prompts they shared with students and my conversation with them, I became reinvigorated to "rediscover" Chicago and tap into that sense of shared experience and community. This isn't to say that I didn't read Chicago authors before, of course, but I started to consciously start seeking out texts that were written by authors with a Chicago or Illinois aesthetic and really with an eye toward plugging the gaps in my own understanding of what that aesthetic is.		

Robert also prioritizes understanding his students' backgrounds and tailoring his text selections to reflect their experiences. He described using Bishop's (1990) "windows and mirrors" framework to select readings that resonate with his students' lived realities. For example, when teaching near Chinatown, he incorporated texts about Chinese American experiences, while his current work with a predominantly Latinx population has shifted his focus to stories reflecting their culture. Additionally, Robert often draws inspiration from his students' interests to foster engagement. Reflecting on one class, he shared, "One of my classes was really, really into ghost stories. So, we ended up using a lot of different ghost stories as models." His personal reading choices and knowledge of books frequently inform his teaching, helping him identify texts that would connect with his students.

Robert's reading life demonstrates a balance between his desire to learn, his professional goals, and his personal enjoyment. He explores his community's past and present through texts such as *Algren: A Life* and seeks to improve his teaching by engaging with academic works such as "Education Builds Character" and *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories*. To prepare for parenthood, he turns to parenting books such as *Bringing Up B     and Dad to Dad: Parenting Like a Pro*. While much of his recent reading has focused on professional growth, with texts such as *Reaching and Teaching Children Who Hurt* and *Teach Like a Champion*, Robert also carves out time for personal enjoyment with a graphic novel titled *Darwin: An Exceptional Voyage*, which he describes in his reading journal as "nice to pick something up that was just for me."

Through meetings, reading journals, and participant-generated artifacts, Robert maintains an active and diverse reading life centered on social connections. He not only acquires recommended readings from others but also seeks out conversations about the texts. His reading choices reflect his commitment to continuous learning and professional growth, while leaving room for personal enjoyment.

George

There was almost a guilt associated with reading. I felt like if I wasn't reading to enhance my teaching, then I was wasting time.

A hand-drawn pen and ink sketch (Figure 4) portraying stacks of large nameless books with children perched atop illustrates how George identified himself as a reader. The viewer's eyes are drawn to the right of the picture, where the largest child sits, not reading, but simply looking. George views this giant child as himself, sitting on a stack of books, gazing down through his telescopes at his reading peers. To George's left, in the foreground, sits a boy with his chin resting on his hands, appearing to listen to a story, possibly being read by the boy next to him. This boy of a darker complexion sits cross-legged as he reads a book, while in the background, another boy appears to be in mid-climb, ascending a stack of books.

Figure 4: George's Reading Identity Artifact



In explaining his reading identity artifact, George shared how his motivation as a young reader often stemmed from a desire to outperform his peers. He recalled, “My goal was just to compete with every other kid and read the most complex, ridiculous, fancy English stuff. I was reading Shakespeare in elementary school, lots of Dickens. Not because Dickens is good, but because Dickens is Dickens.” George read to demonstrate sophistication, choosing texts well above his grade level. Though less competitive now, George’s motivation remains goal-oriented and focused on personal growth.

When I first met George, a 12-year veteran high school teacher in his mid-30s, he was transitioning from a district with a prescribed curriculum to one where he had more autonomy. George shared that, as a new teacher, he felt “almost a guilt associated with reading... if I wasn’t reading to enhance my teaching, I was wasting time.” For much of his career, George’s reading life, like that of many English teachers, centered on the texts he taught, with any personal reading often considered “wasting time.”

George described a life-changing event that reignited his love for personal reading: “Last summer I got appendicitis, and sitting up for long periods was exhausting. I just wanted to lie in bed and started reading again. I remembered how much I loved it.” He began reading anything that caught his interest. “I got into *Conan the Barbarian*, of all things, and loved it.” He began to distinguish between his past reading of “Shakespeare” and his new interest in “absolutely not Shakespeare,” signaling a shift in his view of what has value and a place in his own reading life. This shift allowed him to rediscover the joy and value of exploring diverse texts. In describing this shift, George said:

I started exploring other things, and there’s a lot of cool stuff out there. Part of the fun for me now is discovery—finding new genres. It’s no longer something I feel like I’m doing to enrich myself intentionally. Maybe it is, but the intention isn’t to improve as a reader or a person; it’s just to occupy my time. This perspective has

made it easier to enjoy things I would've thought were beneath me earlier. And that's been fun.

George's reading habits underwent a transformation, leading to a shift in both his attitude and purpose. He began to read more freely, without needing a professional justification.

George's reading journal reflects this newfound freedom in his reading life, with entries that include high-interest, contemporary texts such as *The Inheritance Trilogy* by N. K. Jemisin, *Lost Stars* (set in the Star Wars universe), and *The Silent Patient*. On our Slack message board, he shared his excitement about a short story by Carly Holmes: "'Sleep': WOW. I want everyone to read this story . . . It's a great metaphor for parenthood, especially for motherhood." This experience reignited his interest in the short story genre, inspiring him to seek out more collections and anthologies.

During his final interview, George reflected on how examining his own reading life shaped his understanding of his students as readers and has encouraged him to share books with others. Thinking about when he was an adolescent, he considered, "Why do I seek out the books that I seek out?" and how this awareness could inform his approach to supporting students' reading choices. He acknowledged that while he isn't always successful, he strives to connect students with books that align with their interests, explaining, "When I have a kid who knows what they like to read, I'll pull a book off my shelf and say, 'I think you'd like this one.' And they usually return them, loving it." Through this reflection, George expresses his commitment to fostering meaningful reading experiences for his students, using his own personal history with books as a guide.

George's reading life, like Robert's, reflects a reader who seeks to engage with a variety of texts and share those texts with others. The evolution of his reading life occurred both gradually, as George became more comfortable in his profession, and suddenly, such as when he was forced to remain still while recovering from appendicitis. His journey evolves from reading for competition to seeing reading as a luxury he couldn't afford amidst professional responsibilities, and finally to reading for discovery and finding a new appreciation for a strong personal reading life.

Cheryl

When I read something, I kind of live through it. I don't remember as much, and that's why I'm a good teacher—I understand when kids say, 'I can tell you this or that, but not the name.'

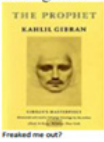
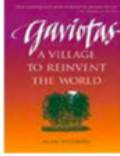
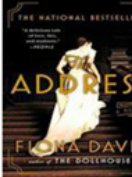
Three months after our final interview, Cheryl sent me an email with a link to the article "Does Johnny's Reading Teacher Love to Read?" (McKool & Vespas, 2009), writing, "Thought of you when I found this. Hope you are surviving . . ." I smiled, knowing it was quintessentially Cheryl, continuing to reflect on the study and thinking of ways to connect her reading life to help others.

I first met Cheryl in 2015 when we were both teaching English in the same county, though at different schools. With over 20 years of experience, she seemed like a seasoned veteran compared to my seventh year of teaching. In 2018, I changed schools and moved to a new county, but when I began this research, I reached out to Cheryl, who had transitioned from her position as an English teacher to her new role as a county-based literacy coach. She eagerly agreed to participate in the study.

Cheryl's reading identity artifact (Figure 5) features a timeline with four rows representing key periods in her life, each tied to significant texts. The first row spans the years from 1961 to the

present, illustrating how reading has remained an ongoing part of her life. The second row connects major life events and places with her reading choices. The third row lists key readings, often categorized by genre. The final row displays book covers representing each phase. This timeline reflects how different personal and professional moments shaped her reading, from preparing to write a new curriculum for her new job to the birth of her daughter, which prompted her to read more children's books. Throughout, reading has been woven into the fabric of Cheryl's life.

Figure 5: Cheryl's Reading Identity Artifact

1961: Early years	1972 (10 years)	1974-79 High School	College 1979-83	1983- First year of teaching and Graduate School	1991	1994	2006-2012	2012 present
Background: Entered school in first grade. No other school available	Grandmother was caretaker while parents worked. 3 bros in school	6 th grade moved to public school: sustained silent reading cards. Labeled groups: purple, blue...	Baltimore		Came to [redacted]	[redacted] Born	Taught at [redacted]	Back at [redacted]
Key Readings: Book of month club (6 years old) Library books Little memory I remember seeing this book on my mom's shelf when I was in 4 th grade? 	Books from home book shelf. Dad work and read paper; mom read for leisure. 	Librarian recommended books: mysteries, romance... I shelved books in public library and learned a lot about children's books <i>Jonathan Livingston Seagull</i> <i>Joined NOW</i> <i>Nat'l Org for Women</i>	Classics Am/Brit Genetics Arts Plays Modern works like Even Cowgirls get the blues"	MD Poetry and Lit society Intro to modern poetry;	Read a lot for new curriculum	Lots of children's books	School wide book group Gaviotas Buddha breakfast? 21 st cen learners for staff: Classics: odyssey	Novels Historical fiction:
	 Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew	 WOMEN WOMEN FOR POET						

Reading was not only woven into the fabric of Cheryl's personal life, but it was also central to how she supported others. As a veteran teacher, texts became a tool for Cheryl to support her colleagues and other community members. Her desire to help is evident in the teaching artifacts she submitted, including a summer reading list for students (Figure 6) and a curated collection of books, articles, websites, podcasts, and videos to help parents engage in race-related conversations with their children (Figure 7). In this current stage of her life, reading has become a thread she uses to connect with and support those around her.

Figure 6: Cheryl's Recommended Summer Reading List

Incoming 9th graders: belonging, journey, intelligence, love, goals	Incoming 10th graders culture, past, ties,	Incoming 11th graders Sci Fi, Culture, War, Am Dream/Reality	Incoming 12 graders education, environment, Ethics, Global
Go on EHS Media Center FROG site	Go on EHS Media Center FROG site		
Stargirl (Spinelli)	<i>The Other Wes Moore</i>	<i>The Marrow Thieves</i> (Dimaline) <i>The Road</i> (McCarthy)	<i>How to Read Literature Like a Professor</i> * by Foster
I am the Messenger (a) by Zusak. http://esl-bits.net/ESL_English_Learning_Audiobooks/I_Am_the_Messenger/preview.html (Messenger audio)	On the Come Up, Angie Thomas	<i>Night Circus</i> by Morgenstern Kindred by Butler (sci fi) (a). http://esl-bits.net/ESL_English_Learning_Audiobooks/Kindred/preview.html	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> by Twain
<i>The Pact</i> (Drs. Davis, Jenkins and Hunt)	<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> by Benjamin Alant	<i>Children of Blood and Bone</i>	<i>Catch 22</i> by Heller
<i>Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy</i> http://esl-bits.net/ESL_English_Learning_Audiobooks/Guide.To.The.Galaxy/preview.html	"Shift" Jennifer Bradbury.	<i>Never Let Me Go</i> (Ishiguro) audio <i>How it Went Down</i> , Magoon	<i>Flannery O'Connor's Short Story Collection</i>
Check out these authors:	Check out these authors:	Authors: Fiona Davis (historical fiction)	Authors: Salinger, Stephen King, Fitzgerald, Hemingway
N.K. Jemisin,	John Green	Stephen King James McBride	<i>Between the World and Me</i> (Coates)
Laurie Halse Anderson	Laurie Halse Anderson	<i>The Nightingale</i>	<i>Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance</i> by Robert Pirsig
Mayberry. (Rot and Ruin series)	N.K. Jemisin	<i>Beneath a Scarlet Sky</i> , Sullivan	<i>Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood</i> by Trevor Noah
Delaney. (Last Apprentice series)	Renee Watson	<i>Unbroken</i>	<i>Dear Martin</i> , by Nic Stone
Flanagan (Rangers Apprentice Series)	<i>Furious Hours: Harper Lee and an Unfinished Story of Race, Religion, and Murder in the Deep South</i> Cep	<i>Poet X</i>	<i>Educated</i> by Westover
John Green		<i>Where the Crawdads Sing</i>	

Figure 7: Cheryl's Recommended Reading List for Parents

Description	Site	Rate it: 5= a m
ARTICLES	Compiled by cecodj@goaction.net	
Books Matter: Children's Literature: some excellent guides	adl.org	
free online magazine	https://www.tolerance.org/	
Conversations	Consider sharing with one another on : https://www.goodreads.com/	
Talking to Kids About Racism, Early and Often These books can help start the conversation By Jessica Grose June 3, 2020:	https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/parenting/kids-books-racism.html?fbclid=IwAR20lFnOTeVF56eH3HmIOFNj6PYKfsZR7c16W7XMBJ9t1JftQ2l0x0Ssylv	
How to Talk Honestly With Children About Racism: 7 tips	https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-honestly-with-children-about-racism	5
podcast	https://drrobysilverman.com/how-to-talk-to-white-kids-about-race-racism-with-dr-margaret-hagerman/	5
Talking to Children About Racial Bias By: Ashaunta Anderson, MD, MPH, MSHS, FAAP & Jacqueline Dougé, MD, MPH, FAAP:	https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Racial-Bias.aspx	
Let's Talk about Racism	http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov16/vol74/num03/Let's-Talk-about-Racism-in-Schools.aspx	
	https://www.todayparent.com/family/books/kids-books-that-talk-about-	

Cheryl compared her reading habits to a “squirrel,” describing her reading life as “all over the place.” Like a squirrel catching food across multiple spaces, her reading was scattered yet purposeful, guided by curiosity, professional needs, and personal interest. Her reading journal reflects this approach, documenting an expansive range of texts across genres and mediums from academic articles and poetry to podcasts, novels, websites, and magazines, in both print and digital

formats. Just as her summer reading list included diverse forms of text, her personal reading practices reveal a reader who gathers texts wherever she finds them, drawing on a wide array of content to nourish herself and others. This variety stems not only from her responsibilities as a literacy coach but also from her broad personal interests.

Cheryl appears to be self-aware about her reading habits and history, acknowledging times when she struggled to find time to read or felt frustrated with her reading pace. Reflecting on her high school experience, she recalled being criticized for not remembering specific details in *The Great Gatsby*: “I remember my teacher saying because I couldn’t remember the names of characters, that I didn’t read it. I kept being told I hadn’t read things when I had; I just couldn’t recall the basic characters.” This experience continues to shape how she views reading today. Cheryl shared, “When I read something, I kind of live through it. I don’t remember as much, and that’s why I’m a good teacher—I understand when kids say, ‘I can tell you this or that, but not the name.’” Her reflection reveals how reading, for her, is an immersive and emotional experience, less about memorizing facts and more about feeling and understanding the content. This personal way of reading allows her to relate to students who may understand the story even if they forget specific details. Instead of viewing this as a deficit, Cheryl sees it as an acceptable way to read. Cheryl’s reading reflects an aesthetic stance, where she focuses on the feelings, ideas, and emotions evoked by a text, engaging with the tension and resolution as the story unfolds (Rosenblatt, 2013). This contrasts with the more text-centered, efferent approach often emphasized in schools.

Cheryl shared that her positive reading identity shifted in middle school, recalling the transition from a Catholic school to a public school. She said, “The public school didn’t really have books. They had these boxes of cards for silent reading, and most of the reading was answering multiple-choice questions.” Cheryl explained that her love of reading “kind of died out” during this time, as it became more about competition and keeping up with others, rather than reading for enjoyment. This shift echoes a larger trend of students becoming disinterested in reading as they reach adolescence (Webber et al., 2024).

In high school, Cheryl found support from librarians who “recommended just some wonderful books.” Cheryl repeatedly spoke about the powerful role librarians and libraries have played in her reading life. For instance, she shared, “The joy of my job is I actually have an office in the library, so I can influence the library and help select books... Whenever I know kids are coming to the library, I run around picking out books for them based on what I know about them.” Cheryl’s role in the library and the joy she finds in curation of texts for students highlight the deeply relational nature of her reading identity, where her personal and professional reading interests align. Given her aesthetic stance, her recommendations were not strictly academic or skills-based but rooted in an understanding of what it means to *feel* seen or comforted by a book.

Further evidence of this aesthetic stance can be observed in Cheryl’s reading journal. Cheryl often reads to ease her mind using phrases such as “escapism from work,” “more fluff, really rough day just need escapism,” “more relief from a taxing day,” and “fluff reading to get sleep.” While Cheryl differentiates between what she refers to as her “beach reads” and the other texts that she reads, she often employs the same aesthetic stance. This emotional engagement with texts shapes not only her personal reading but also how and why she recommends texts to others as she seeks to offer that same experience to students, sharing books that she believes could connect personally with that student in meaningful ways. In this way, her aesthetic stance does not exist apart from her professional role but actively informs how she supports others through reading.

In summary, Cheryl's reading identity artifact highlights the importance of reading throughout various phases of her life. Her reading journals and discussions show a reader who embraces an aesthetic stance, fully engaging with the experience of reading across a broad spectrum and sharing those experiences with others, including her students. Her teaching artifacts further reflect how she integrates her reading life in socially conscious ways, aiming to support her school and home communities.

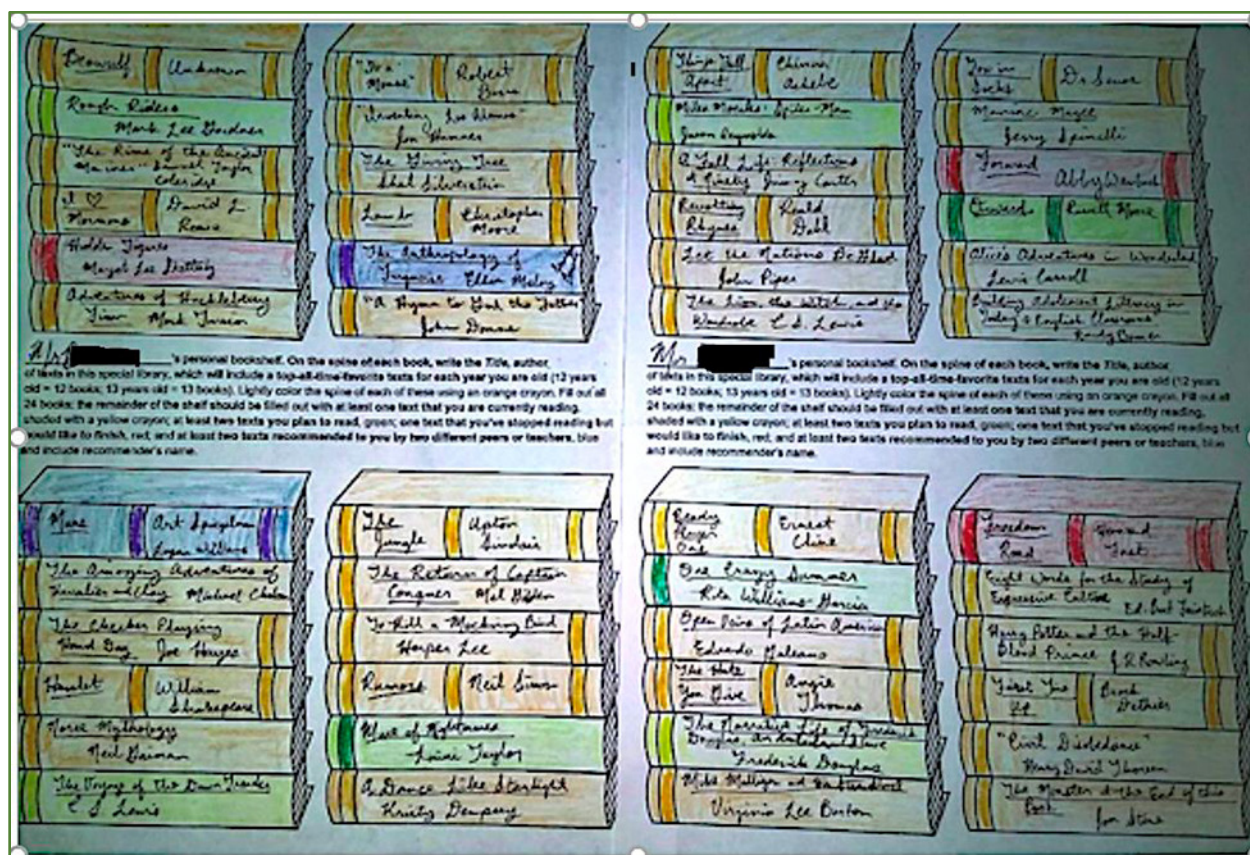
James

*If you don't take time to listen to someone's ideas, or weep together when Johnny dies in *The Outsiders*, then you haven't really met them—you're just in the same room.*

James, a middle school Language Arts teacher in his mid-30s from Western Colorado, arrived late to one of our group meetings. He was still dressed in a black suit after attending the funeral of a former student. He shared, "I had two students who died last summer, and I wrote a poem for them. I shared that part of my life with my students at the beginning of the year, asking, 'What are you dedicating this year to?'" This moment highlights the healing and connective power of words, reflecting James's authenticity in both his personal and professional reading life.

James's reading identity artifact (Figure 8) is a personal bookshelf that provides a window into the breadth of his reading life, a concept he also encourages his students to explore. The color-coded book spines represent different stages of his reading journey. Orange spines list James's all-time favorite books, including classics such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Hamlet*, poetry by John Donne, nonfiction such as *Open Veins of Latin America*, and contemporary young adult novels like *Ready Player One*. Yellow spines represent books he is currently reading, such as *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Miles Morales: Spider-Man*. Red spines mark books he has paused but plans to finish, including *Hidden Figures* and *Forward: A Memoir* by Abby Wambach. Green spines display books he intends to read, like *One Crazy Summer* and *Onward*. Blue spines identify books he recommends to others, such as *Maus* and *The Anthropology of Turquoise*. Overall, James's bookshelf reflects a reader who values past experiences with texts while remaining open to a wide range of diverse books in both content and form. The bookshelf, according to James, is not intended to remain stagnant, but is constantly evolving as his reading life evolves.

Figure 8: James's Reading Identity Artifact



James's reading journal reflects his multiple roles—parent, teacher, Christian, citizen, sports fan, and reader. For example, on April 20, 2020, he listed a variety of texts:

- *Michael Jordan's Least Favorite Teammates Ever* by Marty Fenn
- *All Colorado Schools to Remain Closed for the Rest of the Academic Year* by Erica Meltzer
- *Starry River of the Sky* by Grace Lin
- *Solid Joys* by John Piper
- *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss
- *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton
- "Miss Bianca: The Ultimate Disney Princess: Is Miss Bianca the Greatest of All Disney Princesses?" by Peter Fenzel

This snapshot of his active and varied reading life shows the breadth of his interests, from sports and current events to children's literature, epic fantasy, and Christian devotionals.

James often emphasized the power of shared reading experiences, especially with his students. When asked why reading together was important, he explained:

Shared experiences bring people together. You grow to love one another, understand each other, or even dislike each other based on what you go through

together. If you don't take time to listen to someone's ideas, or weep together when Johnny dies in *The Outsiders*, then you haven't really met them—you're just in the same room.

When James talked about "weeping together," he wasn't speaking figuratively. For him, texts can be personal, capable of bringing readers to tears and drawing them closer to one another. He shared a memorable story of this vulnerability in his classroom:

I read *The Wednesday Wars* with my seventh graders. There are two parts that make me weepy—the cafeteria worker whose husband died in Vietnam, and a Vietnamese child at a refugee orphanage who faces a racist attack. There's this moment where I'm just like, 'Whoa,' I'm in tears. A kid once asked me, 'Why are you crying?' I said, 'Why aren't you crying? That's the real question.'

When James wept while reading *The Wednesday Wars*, he modeled authenticity in his reading and teaching. While this moment underscores James's deep emotional engagement with the text and his willingness to model vulnerability for his students, it also reveals certain assumptions about how readers should respond. He was surprised when a student did not share the same emotional connection, which perhaps inadvertently reinforced a view of reading that privileges a singular, "correct" emotional response. Rather than inviting multiple ways of reading, James's comment may have missed an opportunity to validate diverse reader experiences. Still, for James, reading is not just about acquiring skills for a test; it is a deeply personal and potentially transformative experience—a response he encourages, and perhaps expects, his students to share.

James often spoke about reading in grand terms. To him, reading is a way to "connect with humanity". When asked if all English teachers need to love reading, James responded, "No, but yes. You don't have to read everything, or love it, but doesn't it make life so much better?" This belief in the value of reading is embedded in his teaching. James encourages his students to engage in self-selected reading throughout the year, exploring a variety of genres. Reflecting on his teaching, James used a metaphor, saying, "This job has a lot of sowing seeds... It might sprout sometime, but I'm doing a lot of work, just hoping, hoping, hoping." His words suggest that for James, reading goes beyond academic success; he is striving to nurture an appreciation and love of literature in his students, similar to the deep appreciation he holds for literature.

Through both his personal reading and his teaching, James demonstrates how literature can be personally impactful and help to forge meaningful connections. His commitment to reading extends beyond acquiring knowledge or meeting expectations; it is about forging connections, embracing new perspectives, and enriching the lives of those around him.

Discussion and Implications

Several trends emerged in the profiles that provide insight into the reading of English teachers and how these lives may inform how teachers take up reading with their students. For example, choice often led to positive experiences with reading, and these choices often reflect participants' current life circumstances. Robert read parenting books to prepare for fatherhood. Cheryl read to escape from a challenging workday. George, when life circumstances forced him to slow down, read for the sake of discovery. James read for the not-so-simple reason of enhancing the quality of his life and deepening his connection with others. These varied reasons for reading provide just a glimpse into the multitude of purposes and circumstances that can shape a teacher's (and everyone else's) reading lives. Talking openly, amongst other teachers and their students, about the varying purposes that guide their reading can help other people to see the different ways reading does or

could emerge in their own lives. These conversations can also help teachers consider how to align in-class readings with both existing and potential reading purposes and interests of their students.

The reading profiles also underscore that reading can be a social act that thrives in shared experiences and interactions. For example, James demonstrates that reading can enhance his ability to deepen relationships with others through texts like *The Wednesday Wars*. Similarly, Cheryl's sharing her reading lists with community members and recommending books to students in the library shows a commitment to taking her reading experience and using it to benefit others. Likewise, George's excitement in guiding students in their book selections underscores how a teacher's reading life can potentially influence the reading lives of others. Robert's reading identity artifact visualizes a reading life shaped by his social connections as he engages in ongoing dialogue about texts with family, students, colleagues, and community members to inform his text selection. Taken together, these reading profiles highlight the social nature of reading, suggesting that teachers should foster positive social experiences around books, whether through shared reading, recommending books to others, creating reading lists, or finding other ways to bring reading into communal spaces in the classroom.

These reading profiles also highlight the importance of teachers finding time to read and reflect on text selection. All participants chose to read a wide variety of texts, and this led to opportunities to provide positive reading experience for their students. James's reading identity artifact illustrates a teacher who thoughtfully considers what he reads, what he plans on reading, and how he can model an active reading life for his students. Perhaps his profound experience teaching *The Wednesday Wars*, a high-interest young adult text, would not have happened if he had not prioritized reading outside of his professional responsibilities. An active reading life fosters other positive experiences with reading, as seen in Cheryl's and George's approaches to helping students select books. Their abilities to guide student selection of books suggest the value of reading widely and developing a strong knowledge of books that may interest students (Cremin et al., 2009). This knowledge of books can also extend to understanding one's own community and students, as demonstrated by Robert's effort to find texts that were more relevant and meaningful for his students.

Across profiles, participants' reading lives shift in response to changes in their personal and professional contexts. Cheryl describes turning to escapist fiction after exhausting days at work, while also curating reading lists for her students and community, a reflection of her dual identity as reader and mentor. George notes that he read more widely during a period of personal transition, using reading as a space for exploration and renewal. Robert's reading shifts as he prepared for fatherhood, with a noticeable increase in parenting books and resources relevant to his life stage. These examples show how reading practices evolve alongside participants' responsibilities, identities, and emotional needs. These patterns reinforce the idea that teachers' reading lives are dynamic rather than static, continually shaped by life circumstances, professional roles, and personal interests. Recognizing this fluidity is essential for understanding how teachers engage with reading in ways that are both personally meaningful and professionally responsive, and this may also help teachers to understand the many ways that students could engage with texts.

Recognizing the significance of teachers' personal reading lives has implications not just for teachers but also for the institutions that support them. The findings of this study suggest that teacher preparation programs, school systems, and departments should talk explicitly about the value of personal reading and dedicate time and energy to fostering the personal reading lives of teachers (Cremin & Scholes, 2024). This could take many forms, including intentionally providing opportunity for self-reflection through activities such as reading identity artifacts, reflective

drawings (Daisey, 2010), and literacy autobiographies (Brown, 1999; Neville & Johnson, 2022). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that reading lives are dynamic (Merga, 2016; Sroka, 2021).

Participants in this study described positive and meaningful experiences with texts. The reading experiences shared by these teachers did not strictly align with ways students typically are expected to read texts in school. This suggests that teachers should reflect on their own reading lives as they consider ways to foster positive reading experiences for students—experiences that can take many forms (Gomez, 2005). James, Robert, and Cheryl emphasize the powerful relationship between text and others, while Cheryl and George demonstrate that positive experiences with texts often involve reading high-interest, self-selected texts outside of their professional responsibilities. Teacher preparation programs, educators, and schools should investigate ways for teachers and students to have similar positive experiences with texts by prioritizing shared reading experiences and allowing for greater autonomy in text selection.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the reading lives of the participants are shaped by personal experiences, professional demands, and evolving interests. This study underscores the importance of valuing, fostering, and exploring teachers' personal reading practices, not only for their own growth but also for the impact it has on how they view and take up reading in their classrooms. When the teachers in this study engaged in meaningful, self-selected reading, they gained deeper insight into the motivations, struggles, and joys that accompany reading experiences, making them better equipped to support students. By creating space for reflection, discussion, and choice in both teacher preparation programs and school settings, educators can potentially help make the connection between personal and professional reading, ensuring classroom reading experiences are authentic, engaging, and relevant to students' lives, leading to more positive experiences with texts both inside and outside the classroom.

Limitations

Participants' existing interest in reading likely shaped how they reflected on their reading lives throughout the study. Social and identity factors as English teachers may have influenced participants' self-reported reading habits. For instance, participants may have been aware of each other's reading behaviors and felt implicit pressure to read more or present themselves as more avid readers, which could have subtly shaped responses. Similarly, guilt-driven reading may have played a role, where participants felt internal or external pressure to read more than usual to align with their professional identity.

Future Areas for Research

This study contributes to previous research that has explored how teachers influence curriculum and text selection (Brauer, 2009; Brauer & Clark, 2008; Watkins & Ostenson, 2015). However, little is known about how teachers' reading habits and attitudes regarding curriculum and text selection shape students' attitudes and perceptions of school reading. Future research could explore how teachers' reading habits, along with teacher-student interactions around text selection, impact both groups' beliefs about the texts they read in school.

Another potentially promising area of study involves the role of reading identity artifacts in fostering reflection and dialogue among teachers and students. Prior research has highlighted

how artistic creation supports self-expression and identity development (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010; McKay & Barton, 2018). The reading identity artifacts in this study proved to be a powerful tool for reflection among English teachers. Future research could investigate how students engage in creating their own reading identity artifacts and what insights this process might reveal about their self-perceptions as readers. Such work could deepen our understanding of how both teachers and students construct their reading identities and interact with texts in meaningful ways.

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