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THIS BOOK REMINDS ME OF YOU:
THE READER AS MENTOR

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Mendocino is a small town on the Northern California Coast. Established in the 1850's, it reminds many visitors of a New England fishing village. Its only library is a private one staffed by volunteers, with dues of \$2.00 per year. Books are purchased at the specific request of members, as well as for their appearance on sundry book lists. As with any library, borrowers put their names on waiting lists for popular books. But there is another feature which sets this library apart from many of its public counterparts. A librarian will place a member's name on a waiting list when a specific

book strikes him as matching an area of interest of that reader. Handing such a book to the browser, the volunteer may be heard to say "This book reminds me of you."

The feature which animates the Mendocino library in a casual way, is also one which can become an active strategy in the classroom in promoting the habit of reading and developing a variety of interests. This feature is being a mentor.

You, the teacher, are the reader's mentor, whether that reader is your student, your colleague or your friend. No, more accurately, readers are mentors to readers and to future readers; close, trusted, experienced counselors and guides in the development and promotion of a wide variety of reading interests.

Your self-image as a reader is communicated to your students, and affects their perceptions of books and reading.

The Mikulecky Behavioral Reading Attitude Measure (Smith, et al., 1978) is a twenty item, five point Likert Scale which is most useful in tapping attitude through what the respondent does about reading, as opposed to what s/he says about reading. Given a number of hypothetical situations (e.g., doctor's office, shopping mall, gift giving, free time), the person decides if the example is "very unlike me" or "very like me." The results of this measure have been analyzed by Smith, Smith, and Mikulecky (p. 104, 1978) in terms of Krathwohl's taxonomy of attitude:

- Attending: generally aware and tolerant of reading
- Responding: under certain circumstances, willing to read; choose to read and occasionally enjoy it
- Valuing: accept worth of reading as a value to be preferred and extend to others
- Organization: reading--part of an organized value system; habitual, almost "instinctive"
- Characterization: reading is seen as crucial to the person

Your effective functioning as a reading mentor requires your attitudes toward reading to reflect, at the very least, the "value" level. Your aim as a teacher should be to move the child from attending along this continuum of

attitude toward characterization.

Readers As Mentors to Readers

Uses of Reading

Though your reading is a distinctly private and personal act, it must "go public" for you to function as mentor. Readers are mentors by passive example. Ask yourself these initial questions when deciding whether you function as a reading mentor. How well do you serve as a model of a reader? What about you declares "THIS PERSON IS A READER!"?

There are many behaviors which might contribute to that projected image of READER. One of the most obvious is how much you read--all forms and types of reading, not just recreational reading. (Reading Time or Newsweek while brushing your teeth is one litmus test.) Another common indicator of READER is the ability to name readily the last book you recommended to some one. Think about the reading experiences which fit these categories:

- a book that influenced or affected you personally or professionally,
- a book that you have read more than once, or would read again, and
- an author whom you have read comprehensively.

What made these books powerful and meaningful to you? What is special about the writer? Have you shared these titles and authors and reading experiences with other people? My choices include Freedom to Learn by Carl Rogers, Till We Have Faces by C. S. Lewis, Jane Austen, and Dick Francis.

Your environment speaks silent "volumes." Does your home, classroom, or office say, "This person is a reader!"? Indeed, where are your books; are they visible to your visitors and to your students? Does it cost more to move your books than it does to move you? When did you last look at some one else's bookshelf? ("Don't look too closely; I might not want to lend that one." Browse a bookshelf, know a reader, know a person.

Another of these public acts of "witness" are the uses to which you put reading. The pleasures of reading

are not just recreational ones, but also the pleasures of mastery, of answering a question, of learning, of accomplishing a task. One of your tasks as an active reading mentor thus becomes the expansion not only of reading interests, but also the expansion of the uses to which reading is put, and the awareness of when reading is occurring. Tovey (1976) questioned first graders about their perceptions of what constituted reading in the classroom and when it took place. Their awareness of "reading" was much narrower than that of an adult circumscribed by the "reading circle."

The variety of uses to which reading may be put needs your attention, valuing, and promotion. The greater the number of functions a youngster has for reading, the more likely s/he is to be an effective and enthusiastic reader. Additionally, you must take advantage of the uses for reading which a child brings from home. Heath (1980), investigating the functions of literacy in working class homes, found that it was inaccurate to say that a child came to school without uses for reading. Rather the child came with uses for reading which were not commonly emphasized or even acknowledged in the classroom. Begin with what the child brings in terms of the uses of literacy and build and expand from that point.

Peer Influences - Peer Mentors

The recommendations from book jackets, teachers, and peers, form the major bases for young readers' book selections. Gallo (1982) reminds us that peer recommendations are the most powerful ones for students. It is the enthusiasm of another student which will move an adolescent to a book rack when nothing else will. An English teacher at a residential facility for juvenile offenders took book requests from the wards when quarterly purchase of paperbacks was being planned. The youngster who ordered a specific title was the first person to read the book, and often that book was passed from hip pocket to hip pocket as the reader's friends borrowed it. One means of awakening the reading mentors in your classroom is to ask of your students: "What have you read lately that's good?" (p. 88) "What are you carrying in your bookbag?"

Teacher (and Other Adult) Influence

Your credibility in the role of teacher/reading mentor

Conclusions

The value of your recommendations builds your credibility as a reading mentor (Gallo, 1982). Being a mentor, then, is a role into which you grow with each reader or future reader whom you encounter. The consistently high quality of the suggested reading matter (as perceived by your student) leads to continued reader satisfaction and growth in reading maturity and sophistication. To quote Henry Bamman: "Discrimination is good taste practiced again and again."

Christenbury (1981) speaks of "reading epiphanies", when a book takes hold, and you must read it to its conclusion without pause. With such an experience, you become a changed person. Being a mentor to someone means that that person's self-definition as a reader may also be modified, and s/he in turn may become a reading mentor.

In the first chapter of Italo Calvino's If on a winter's night a traveler, the author defines himself as a reader.

Friendly reader, this book reminds me of you.

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is built more slowly than that of student peers as:

- 1) you talk about what you are reading,
- 2) recommend books with film or television adaptations,
- 3) read aloud riveting opening lines,
- 4) recommend brief books, rather than the "dreaded" long ones, and
- 5) develop exciting classroom libraries.

You entice your readers with enthusiasm, knowledge, interest, and concern with books and children. Woo them. Sell books to your readers in light of your own interests, as well as those of the youngsters. Your enthusiasm for your own reading will ring more true than "teacher-interest" in your students' reading. Imagine a seventeen year old student in a remedial reading lab devouring a box of Dr. Seuss! It happened when he saw his teacher reading them with much amusement. No suggestions were made to read And To Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street, but curiosity drew him to that corner of the classroom.

Share book reviews. The reviewer becomes a surrogate mentor, and her enthusiasm and critical judgment function in lieu of your own, for your students. Take care not to select the sometimes pallid reviews of professional journals, but rather the opinionated, full-blooded reviews of the popular press. Use the mass media reviews from publications which your students would be likely to read, and post these reviews with their citations. Recurring reviewers may become the favored arbiters of taste for specific students. (Don't fail to include student reviews, positive and negative.)

Read to your children, selling the book by the author's use of the language. Introduce language which is meant to be read--well structured, image-laden, intriguing poetry and prose. The reluctant child will learn that he can prolong the joy by reading on his own.

Finally, you cannot be an effective mentor if you do not know your reader. Without knowledge of the reader and of the books, or with only a superficial knowledge, and without enthusiasm for the book and its possibilities for the reader, the recommendation is useless. Not knowing the child's interests, concerns, and history, how can you say, "I have a book that reminds me of you"?