

What Your Colleagues Are Saying...

“In this wonderfully honest book, Justin Stygles shows how our traditional ways of teaching reading—our use of scores, labels, interventions, judgments—are shame-inducing for many students, who retreat to avoidance behavior (“reading is boring!”) or learn to fake it. Stygles is open about how, for a time, he went along with these practices but broke free to pay attention, build relationships, ask questions, become a model, and provide the support students need. It’s a stirring journey.”

—Thomas Newkirk

Professor emeritus, University of New Hampshire
Author, *Embarrassment: And the Emotional Underlife of Learning*

“*‘I Hate Reading’: Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom*, based on Justin Stygles’s years of teaching, narrates the author’s journey into helping students understand themselves as readers, including the why behind their choices of books, avoidance through fake reading, and how they perceive themselves as readers, thinkers, and learners. Rich in diverse ways to get to know students, how to use writing about reading to reveal each student’s feelings and reactions to books, and techniques and questions that can help students construct positive reading identities, Justin continually models the importance of being honest yet nonjudgmental while interacting with students. It’s the powerful stories about individual students and sample conferences between Justin and a student that breathe energy, passion, and deep meaning into his teaching suggestions, inviting you to return to them to reread and re-experience the honesty and pain expressed by students and how Justin responds. An essential guide for teachers in all grades, the book is compelling because it’s written with love and honesty and based on Justin’s teaching and learning journey as well as grounded in research. You’ll return to parts again and again as you strive to create a safe environment for students and give them all the time they need to shift from hating and avoiding reading to choosing to become a reader!”

—Laura Robb

Author, *Guided Practice for Reading Growth* and
Read, Talk, Write: 35 Lessons That Teach Students to Analyze Fiction and Nonfiction

“Justin Stygles *sees* his students. He acknowledges the layers students bring into a classroom, from trauma, poverty, and negative self-perceptions to the perfectionist who performs for others. He is conscious of how shame permeates the lives of his students and how they have become disconnected from reading. Through building an interpersonal bridge with students, he is able to construct a space where students do not fail but rather discover who they are through reading. Stygles’ pedagogy gives merit to the power of relationships; students not only develop a stronger sense of self but also emerge as authentic readers. *‘I Hate Reading’: Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom* delves into why many students loathe reading and gives tangible, student-centered methods that generate intrinsic motivation in our students to treasure reading. To demonstrate his approach to students and reading, Stygles incorporates ample student examples with each strategy outlined. This book changes the way we have traditionally tried to engage students and asks educators everywhere to pause and think about the individual, the student, the reader.”

—Laura Mewa

Assistant Principal

“*‘I Hate Reading’* looks closely not just at what reluctant readers do but also how they feel. When we uncover and acknowledge shame, we create the context for students to experience other feelings as readers, such as joy and pride. Thank goodness Stygles brings his years of experience as a teacher and a scholar to help us all ask a different set of questions about the student readers we support. Full of research, relatable vignettes, and concrete tools to try, this book will change the way you view the student readers who keep you up at night.”

—Gravity Goldberg

Author, *Teach Like Yourself* and
Mindsets and Moves

“Justin Stygles’s book offers new insight into finding connections and reaching our students where they are. We all know teaching is about building relationships, but Stygles looks at the intersection of years of established reading pedagogy and everything we know about building relationships and then takes a step backward to focus on the barriers to both, which are rooted in shame. He then offers practical solutions for breaking down those barriers. My students are in high

school, yet the dysfunctional behaviors Stygles attributes to shame are still apparent at that level—perhaps more so. The research in this book offers hope that it is not too late to discover and eliminate those barriers and to instill a love of reading in my most reluctant learners. This book is a thorough examination of the ways in which shame holds our students back, an honest look at the role we may play in perpetuating the shame cycle, and a guide to inform our actions going forward as we continue in our efforts to build resilient readers.”

—Stephanie Fearn

Literacy coach, secondary English teacher,
and adjunct professor

“As much as we’d like all students to associate reading with joy, often students come to our classrooms with negative perceptions of themselves as readers. In his powerful self-reflection, Justin is brave enough to unpack his instructional practices that have had unintended negative consequences on his students. I’ll admit it: At some points, it was hard for me to read Justin’s words as he stirred up my own shameful memories of when I had failed my own students. But ultimately, this book pushed me to understand how to better connect to students for whom reading does not equate with joy. Full of candid conversations and classroom resources, this book helps us transform reading shame into reading pleasure.”

—Molly Ness

Author, *Every Minute Matters*, and
Think Big With Think Alouds, Grades K-5

“Justin Stygles has done what no other author has done: He’s discussed students’ reading identity in relationship to the delicate subject of shame. Justin gives teachers a means to help students grow their ability and passion to read while guiding their emotional growth and development as learners. This book provides a path for teachers to take to heal students’ emotional selves and also develop their passion as readers. The tips for assessment and instruction focus also work well in classrooms where students may be learning to work together in groups and where students are becoming part of a reading community.”

—Nancy Akhavan

Author, *The Big Book of Literacy Tasks, Grades K-8*

“This book is a labor of love. Justin Stygles unequivocally gets to the heart of what our students need. This is a must-read by all educators who want to grow and refine their practice as literacy teachers. What matters the most is that all our students are successful, accepted, and embraced in all classrooms, regardless of reading levels.”

—Kara DiBartolo

Director of Curriculum, Instruction, and Innovation
The Sherman Public Schools, Sherman, CT

“Justin’s book cuts through the competing agendas within schools to remind us that our job as educators is to improve the lives of our students.”

—Talya Edlund

Assistant Principal, 2016 Maine Teacher of the Year

“Justin’s passion for engaging his learners and his clear descriptions of how to attain solid literacy development are encouraging and refreshing. It warms my heart as an experienced school administrator that he has worked diligently to get his message out to other educators and parents on proven practices to improve literacy. My hope is for Justin to continue teaching and share further professional development on how to develop student confidence and security in their reading and writing.”

—Ken Spinney II

Special Education Director

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"I Hate Reading"

Overcoming Shame in the Reading Classroom

Justin M. Stygles

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
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(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.

1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044
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18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

President: Mike Soules

Vice President and
Editorial Director: Monica Eckman

Director and Publisher,
Corwin Classroom: Lisa Luedeke

Senior Content Development
Manager: Julie Nemer

Editorial Assistant: Nancy Chung

Project Editor: Amy Schroller

Copy Editor: Deanna Noga

Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.

Proofreader: Lawrence W. Baker

Indexer: Integra

Cover Designer: Rose Storey

Marketing Manager: Margaret O'Connor

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Visit the “*I Hate Reading*” companion website at
resources.corwin.com/ihatereading
for these downloadable resources.



PREFACE



Hi. My name is Deven Johnson. I know you don't like me. You're always upset with me because I "never do anything," especially reading.

Remember last Thursday? You were mad at me because I didn't write a response during test prep. You snapped at me this time. That was new. I told you I wasn't interested in what I read, so I didn't answer the question.

You said, "That's unacceptable! You're better than that."

I am, though? Really?

Then you looked at me with that disappointed look you always give me. You know the one where you know you can't "fix" anything about me, even though you want to?

Remember last week? You said I reminded you of you when you were my age?

You said that you didn't have a dad much growing up.

You said that you went to school looking scrappy, with cigarette-scented clothes?

You talked about how you overcame it, and I could, too, if integrity mattered to me. (What's integrity anyway?)

You said something funny like, "If you hold yourself to a high standard, despite what is happening in your life, you will rise above."

It sounded stupid, and I don't know what you meant.

Here's what I do know. Every other teacher tried being nice to me, but I know they only did it because they felt bad for me.

Remember last month? You caught me reading the same picture book again? I said I left my book at home. Again. Actually, I don't know where it is. You'll say I lost it. You've also never been to my house. Worse, I hate it when you catch me. It's like you're "targeting" me.

Even though every other teacher was nice, why can't you ignore me like they did? Don't you have a favorite you can go smile with and leave me alone?

So what if I left my book at home? Don't people expect that of me? I always do it, then they say, "It's ok, just try to remember it tomorrow." I try. I just don't remember. (You're probably going to think I don't care.) And also, why is it my fault that I can't think of anything I'm interested in reading?

Why do you even ask me if I have time to read? Everyone tells me where I need to be and what I need to be doing. After that, I find myself all alone. My parents are on their phones; my brother is playing his games. And if I start reading, I'm going to be told I'm supposed to be doing what they said. I don't even know what it is!! I'm so tired. I hate myself because I can do nothing right, and I (feel like I) get in trouble for it all the time!

Imagine you live in a world where the only thing you do is go home and play video games and watch movies. I don't go anywhere! You always talk about going to Portland. I've never been there!

You know what else? I know you hate that you actually kneel next to me and try to "understand the way I think." I'm dumb. Everyone gets it but me. And there you are again. You never go away. I hate that you're not brushing me off. You said something like, "Accountability is compassion . . ." and then something like, "If you expect something of me, it's your responsibility to be right alongside me," something stupid like that. Something teachers are supposed to say.

That's why you're so annoying. You try to be nice to me. You expect me to "become someone," as you say. I'm just glad you don't say something like "GRIT" or use a "growth mindset," whatever that means, like some of my last teachers. Am I supposed to be inspired by you saying words to me? Do you think I'm actually in control of my life? Why do you think I'm smart? No one else does! That's what none of you get. No one cares about me! Sure, they say they do, when I have to read aloud as they show me how bad I am as a reader.

And I'm not done! Next, you say that you "get me." Even though I want to disagree, I wonder, "Why do I half think you know my secret?"

Think of the possibility of not knowing what to do or who you are because all those who you rely on dictate your existence? Moreover,

those same loved ones abandon you, only to repeatedly tell you all you do is wrong. Imagine a world where any sense of creativity or autonomy is extinguished because you're not what you're expected to be. What if your biggest hope was to be able to do the very thing you were most certain you couldn't do? A hope so big, so overwhelming, that your best strategy was avoidance. Why not live what you've always known—failure?

What am I talking about? I'm talking about what we love so much. Reading.

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Thanking people is hard. Saying thank you is one thing. Truly conveying that sentiment is another. Sometimes you simply cannot express the appreciation felt so deep down inside.

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I hope you understand.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Justin M. Stygles has served readers as an intermediate and middle-grades teacher for 19 years. For many years he taught Grades 4-6 in rural and coastal Maine schools. His other experiences include working in summer literacy programs in rural, suburban, and private schools. He currently teaches fourth grade in Portland, Maine. Justin is from a military background and graduated

with an associate's degree in harness racing before becoming an educator. He's served on committees with the International Literacy Association and National Council of Teachers of English. Previous publications include articles in *Literacy Today*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *Hoof Beats*. "*I Hate Reading*" is his first professional book.

DISRUPTING PEDAGOGY

*Prioritizing Students
in the Shadows of Shame*



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*“Every child has a legitimate need to be noticed, understood,
and taken seriously.”*

—Alice Miller

It's 2:55. The students have finally gotten themselves packed up and out the door. You look at the clock and sigh. You have 5 minutes to get things together and get to the faculty meeting. It's been a long day. The morning schoolwide assembly went on longer than planned as the school debated the final agenda item: What to name the school's new fish, a colorful Beta. It was the second assembly this week to interrupt your language arts block, leaving half an hour to squeeze in some independent reading and meet with a group of students who cannot seem to find that "love for books."

Now in your fifth year of teaching, you are finally feeling comfortable grouping students and engaging them productively. But this group has proved especially challenging. Richard seemed to make every group hard. Like today, knowing your time was limited, you kept the focus narrow—practicing the strategy of prediction, something you have been working on for a week. It all fell apart when you asked Richard for his prediction about what might happen next to a character who recently broke his leg, and he muttered, "He would get a cast."

Everyone laughed. You would have laughed, too, maybe if this was a different student, but this was characteristic of Richard and his attitude that year: disengaged, discouraged, distant, and even outright defiant at times. He rarely remembered to bring his independent reading book, and when he did, he mostly pretended to read. You tried all the traditional accountability techniques—keeping him in at recess, sitting with him while he read, calling home. Once he was given extra credit. Nothing worked. Last year he barely achieved a "meets standards score" on the state test. This year you doubted he could do that.

Your mind spins as you walk to the library for the meeting. How can I reteach prediction so that Richard will, in spite of himself, see its value? How can I get him, and all the students really, to take it seriously? If they could only seriously engage the strategies! If they could find a pathway to true comprehension, they might find a path to stronger engagement. But how? You sift back through *Strategies That Work* (Harvey & Goudvais, 2000, 2007) and Ellery's (2008) *Creating Strategic Readers* to find an answer. As you scan the library for a place to sit, ideally in the back, your mind wanders. You consider changing the reading material, maybe finding something less challenging.

As your mind wanders, the principal announces the topic at hand. You look up and see the following words projected in huge type on the screen at the front of the room.

“Every child has a legitimate need to be noticed, understood, and taken seriously.”

—Alice Miller, author of *The Drama of the Gifted Child*

Then the principal turns to the room and says with a smile intended to encourage the staff, “This quote represents our focus.” Instead, your heart sinks. “I’m already trying!” you think to yourself.

Acknowledging Reality: What's Happening?

Undoubtedly, we as educators are working hard to manage a complex set of agendas and needs every single day. There are state and district mandates, pacing guides, and new curriculums to learn. Students are coming to our classes with trauma histories and negative self-perceptions, not to mention poverty, food insecurity, and/or a sense of feeling unloved. We have students who need room to cry, sleep, or just want a relationship in which to feel valued. Then there is instruction—who needs scaffolding, reteaching, extended time, and interventions?

The list is endless, and it is always on your mind; perhaps, enough so that the tears begin to fall just after students leave. I know. It happens to me regularly.

When I started reading about shame, initially for my purposes, I began to see my readers in the details and definitions provided by researchers. I was quite confident about my abilities to raise reading scores and improve reading achievement, almost too proud. And it came at a cost. It was the shame research that led me to redefine my approach and what *success* meant, and to whom, in the classroom.

I remember vividly the first time I asked a student in a reading conference to share her thoughts about herself and reading. I turned to her student and said, “*What do you think about yourself as a reader, and what is it like when you read?*” She looked back at me with a perplexed face almost as if saying, “*You mean I’m supposed to be taking something from this?*”

I’d recently completed an M.A. program in literacy, thinking I had established a new, enlightening pedagogy as a literacy specialist and

teacher. Now, I had this young lady, Angelina, age 11, sitting in front of me. She'd moved into my fifth-grade class about mid-year. Like many students, Angelina's benchmark assessment and reading achievement scores didn't identify a need for intervention. But something lurked beneath the surface that made me uneasy about her reading and her academic future. When I listened to her talk about books, her reading habits, and read her written responses, she lacked *substance*. Most of her replies were phrases that represented what students often think they should say such as, "I really liked the book because it had interesting characters." That was it. To be honest, she didn't need to read the book to come up with that answer.

Unbeknownst to her, Angelina sent me a signal, a hint that invited me to "visit the well," so to speak. Even if she achieved standards this year, it was only a matter of time before she began to struggle with the very subject she was always "good at" and praised for. While Angelina was nothing like Richard from a behavior and attitude standpoint, when it came to their test scores, they could have been identical.

So it came to be that during a conference with Angelina I shifted my chair a bit so I could make eye contact, looked directly at her, and said, "So, Angelina, tell me about you as a reader."

I wasn't sure what to expect when I asked that question. I'm not even sure what I hoped to learn. This was a wholly new experiment for me.

I guess it was for Angelina, too, so I was a bit surprised when she answered almost immediately, with absolute confidence and, I think, some pride, pronouncing, "Oh that's easy. I'm a level 50 reader!"

In our district, level 50 meant reading at a fifth-grade level. It meant that Angelina recognized that she was on grade level. It clearly meant to her that she was doing what she should be doing, that all was right with the world.

To say I was dismayed would be an understatement.

I thought about all the effort, resources, and hard thinking that had gone into the "expertise" I had developed, along with the elaborate curriculum I had mastered and was now offering to her and others. My focus had always been on critical thinking, strategic reading (Barnhouse & Vinton, 2012), and fostering a reading life outside of school. Yet, in spite of all my efforts, it was clear to me that the major lesson Angelina had learned was how to perform—for us.

We asked her to identify a strategy, and she identified a strategy. We asked her to recall facts and key details, and she produced them. We

asked her to engage in independent reading, and she dutifully chose a book, read enough pages a week, wrote about it in her journal, then abandoned the book before finishing, and chose another.

It's no wonder Angelina thought of herself as a level 50 reader. We thought of her that way, too. Her answer to my question that day forced me to see this hard truth about what I was doing all day as I focused on fulfilling what I thought I was expected to do. I was teaching a curriculum, not students.

It's no wonder Angelina thought of herself as a level 50 reader. We thought of her that way, too.

Pedagogies and Implications: The Ubiquity of Shame

When I started this book, I began a serious inquiry into students' experiences. I let myself be led by my curiosity into their thinking about their own learning. As I began to actively question and urge them to reflect, I learned that I, as an educator, had made a choice, a choice that was undermining the students' sense of self and stunting their development as readers and active agents of their own learning (Aukerman, 2007). I had chosen curriculum *first* and rather than building strong and healthy relationships around reading and learning, in the process, I was building a culture of resistance, defiance, disengagement, and—the word none of us want to hear—shame.

I was building a culture of resistance, defiance, disengagement.

Shame is a strong word. I don't use it lightly. I'm not arguing that we as teachers use shame as a tool to control students. Nor am I saying every student experiences shame because of how we teach reading. I am contending that to fully understand the effects of our practices on students' identities, it's useful to consider how shame infiltrates our classrooms: what I'm calling *the shame factor*.

Alice Miller, the author of the quote displayed by the principal at the faculty meeting in the opening vignette and whose research into and writing on shame is considered by many to be foundational, is one of the many thinkers on the topic who have driven my understanding of the complex workings of shame in the classroom. Her thinking has helped me navigate the important work of considering what it means to make this critical shift from teaching a curriculum, to teaching students, to teaching maturing people with real emotions and perceptions that stimulate their motivations, concerns, ambitions, life stories, fears, and hopes and dreams.

In the *Pictures of Childhood* (1995) and *Drama of the Gifted Child* (1997), Miller explores how children develop an identity under the influence of parental values. Of course, teachers and schools are not parents, and thus we are not concerned here with Miller's conclusions about the trauma children can experience under parental dominance. But her work has important insights to offer about how adult authority figures can impact identity development in children and use their authority to manipulate children into embracing the adults' world-view and values. According to Miller, this is where the shame and fear of shame can undermine a child's identity and autonomy, making it impossible for a child to cultivate and express their unique gifts. It's important to note that Miller's view of giftedness has nothing to do with the particular kind of cognitive capacities educators associate with the gifted. Giftedness is instead a function of a child's development of the self. Manifesting a whole, authentic self, according to Miller, means fully expressing their gifts. This giftedness is thwarted when children are asked to dissociate from and stunt their developing identities to serve their adult-imposed values. The result is shame and shame-based behaviors.

For the purpose of this book, shame is a negative sense of self, an internalization of faultiness or unworthiness.

What is shame? This word, and others like it such as *shamed* or *shaming*, is tossed around a lot in different contexts but is often different from other emotions like guilt and embarrassment (Newkirk, 2017; Tangney et al., 1996). For the purpose of this book, shame is a negative sense of self, an internalization of faultiness or unworthiness. Shame is an abstract noun, not a verb. More, I define shame as the inability to manifest as ourselves because what we represent is not accepted or what others desire. We have all felt it in various situations, maybe instances

when we let someone down or didn't measure up to expectations. But Miller is concerned with something even more profound and pervasive—the emotional consequences of a shame-based identity. When someone lives in shame, they feel they will never truly measure up. Their lives revolve around trying to prove their own worth to the outside world—to *be the person someone else expects them to be*.

While there is much nuance in the literature about the sources of shame and its effects on the self and identity, researchers agree on the following:

- ▶ Shame alters a person's perception of “what is” from “how I see it,” to “how am I *supposed* to see it” (Rizvi et al., 2011).
- ▶ Shame is detrimental to the self, interfering with an individual's ability to develop a functional and healthy self-image; highly individualized (Brown et al., 2011; Middleton-Moz, 1990; Monroe, 2009).
- ▶ Feelings of shame occur when the perceived flawed parts of the self—the parts you want to hide from others—are revealed or exposed (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).
- ▶ Shame is relationally based. It grows out of relationships and social contexts (Gilbert, 2000).
- ▶ While it is in the same family of emotions as guilt, embarrassment, and humiliation, shame is different and distinct from these (Kaufman, 1993; Nathanson, 1992; Potter-Efron, 2002).
- ▶ Shame has received only limited attention from researchers in psychology while student mental health (psychopathology) is a rising concern in primary, intermediate, and secondary schooling (Ang & Khoo, 2004; Muris, 2015; Muris, et al., 2014; Thomaes et al., 2007; Welford & Langmead, 2015).
- ▶ Shame can result in the following dysfunctional behaviors in both children and adults (Dearing & Tangney, 2011; Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Nathanson, 1992; Potter-Efron, 2002):
 - withdrawal and avoidance
 - grandiosity and putting on a false front
 - perfectionism
 - expressing contempt for others' values and actions
 - unhealthy dependency on others or on substances
 - confrontational and oppositional tendencies

Shame in the Classroom

If you have noticed in your students one of the behaviors mentioned in the last bullet above, it's not necessarily because these students are products of shame-based families. Shame grows and thrives in social and relational contexts (Gilbert, 2003; Muris & Meesters, 2013; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robbins, 2004). Interpersonal relationships have a significant impact on our motivations (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It's within relationship to others that shame manifests itself. In fact, if a human never encounters another person, shame can never be experienced. This, of course, can never happen; we are biologically engineered to rely on our caretakers and other relationships. For many generations, the act of shaming in public and parochial schools was used to "encourage" students to reform, academically or socially, for the better. But as medical social worker Dr. Ronald Potter-Efron (2002) relates, "Problems occur . . . when individuals feel too much shame for too long a time or when they conclude that they cannot change their ways and so are doomed to a lifetime of *perpetual failure* (p. 1; emphasis added). The perpetual failure part is our link to reading development. How many struggling readers do we see, day in and day out, who self-identify as failures, maybe perpetual failures? Our readers internalize the idea that they are not as valued or as talented as their peers, or capable of the expectations placed before them. In short, they may believe they are bad or defective. That is no inspiration to read, nor is it motivation to even try. And I'm afraid this is what many of our struggling learners have come to learn about themselves.

*How many struggling readers do we see,
day in and day out, who self-identify as
failures, maybe perpetual failures?*

Where does this occur? Within relationships. We are prone to basing our self-worth on our own perceptions of ourselves in relation to others or in relation to the social constructs, attitudes, and beliefs that dominate our culture. Beliefs that others hold about us, whether we're rewarded in our attempts to gain favor, acceptance, or even recognition, influence how and what we believe about ourselves. When a relationship is broken because of deficiency, ineptitude, or because

the relationship is contingent on one's ability to rise up to someone's expectations, it can trigger shame. Many shame researchers relate that "it takes a relationship to experience shame. It takes a relationship to get out of shame" (Gilbert & Andrews, 1998; Mordrcin, 2016; Tangney & Fisher, 1995). Whether trauma-based, from feeling rejected or abandoned, or simply desiring someone to see you as you, it's very true. And that's where our role as teachers, as mirrors, makes a difference—to help students "get out of shame."

In the reading classroom, too often the focus is on performance indicators imposed by an adult or authority. As you read through the list of common shame-based behaviors described in the next section, it may be tempting to think, "This is what students *do* in school," "This is personality-based. Some students are just like that," or "This is developmental. It's our job to teach students how to behave."

You might be correct. But I would urge you not to dismiss the role shame may be playing in your classroom. Instead, push your thinking a bit further. Why is it that this is what students *do* in school? Does the same student who dysregulates during reading demonstrate this same behavior in other contexts? On the playground, at home, or in different subject areas? And finally, if this behavior is developmental, is the structure of the reading classroom and the delivery of the curriculum promoting developmental growth or impeding it?

- 1. *Withdrawal.*** Students distance themselves from the demands of the classroom, using different strategies to remain unnoticed and stay under the radar. In a small group, for example, a student might respond to a question about what they think by pointing to a group member and saying, "I think the same as him." This is a pretty standard self-protective move used by students who don't want to risk saying the wrong thing and exposing their ignorance to the group.
- 2. *Grandiosity.*** In reading, grandiosity appears in those students who have no clear understanding of their abilities yet believe and contend they can perform nearly impossible tasks. Grandiose readers often "read" 500-page (fantasy) books in a single night. Some truly are reading the pages, some are putting on a false front and mostly pretending to read, but none of them are engaging with the content in a substantial way. Grandiose readers are motivated by the outside validation and recognition they get for completing the book. Note: It is important to distinguish grandiose readers from those students who are passionately driven by reading, particularly an interest in a genre or an author.

3. **Contempt.** Expressions of contempt can involve actions as simple as directly ignoring a teacher's request by pretending not to hear. It also can be expressed more overtly by routinely pushing back and calling the teacher's methods into question, responding to instructions with such comments as, "This is stupid," "This is boring," and "None of my other teachers made me do this before." These expressions and actions are efforts on the part of students to define their own terms and assert power and identity in the face of threatening change.
4. **Perfectionism.** On the surface, perfectionism in students can look like a good thing. Perfectionism is accompanied by a range of behaviors, including, but not limited to, feelings of anxiety and an obsessive desire to get everything right. Perfectionists might also avoid tasks so as not to lose stature. Others put all their efforts into maintaining an acceptable identity by appearing "smart" and are reluctant to receive feedback and admit mistakes. Many perfectionists are students whose self-worth depends heavily on external praise of their intellect and ability. This "problem" may not manifest as directly as a problem in the classroom as the other shame-based behaviors. Indeed, these students' reading scores may be a teacher's pride and joy, but at what cost to the student's long-term development and sense of identity?
5. **Compliance and Dependency.** Some students cope by becoming overly compliant and even dependent on the teacher for help and instructions. Unlike students who resort to expressions of contempt, compliant students do exactly what they are told, trying to follow directions in the hopes that this will be enough. Some students, like Angelina, the student who identified as a level 50 reader earlier in the chapter, have used this strategy to "get by," but without internally driven confidence and purpose, their engagement in reading often remains on the surface. So when higher demands are made of them to think critically about their reading, their reading success suffers; scores go down when compliance isn't enough.
6. **Refusal of Responsibility.** Feeling unworthy or experiencing failure, many students avoid feelings of shame by turning away from their own actions to focus on other people's failures. Students might point out the inadequacy of other readers or compare themselves to struggling readers to avoid responsibility, feedback, or otherwise disconcerting realizations about themselves.

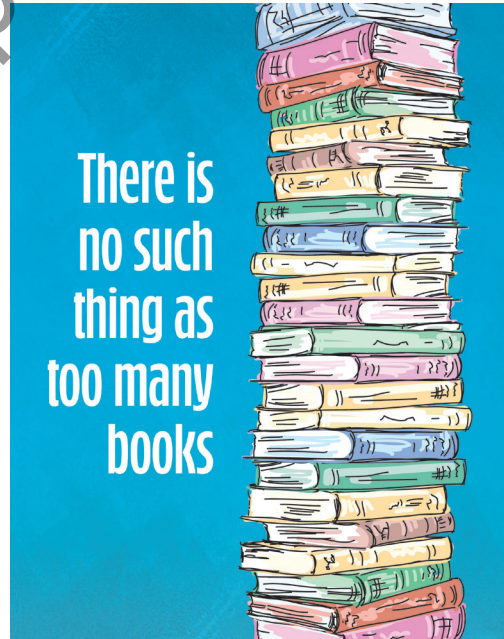
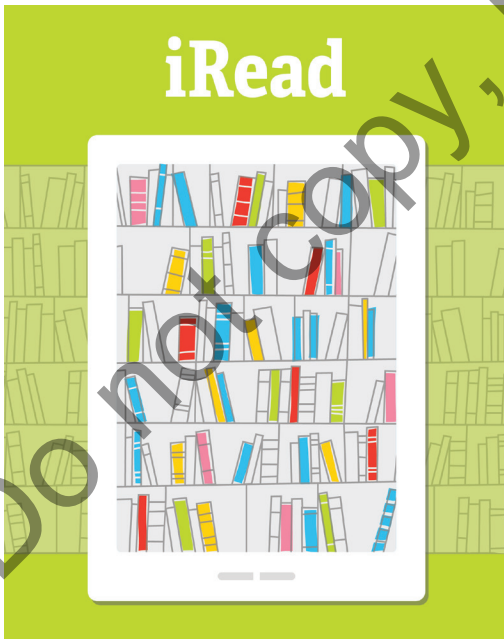
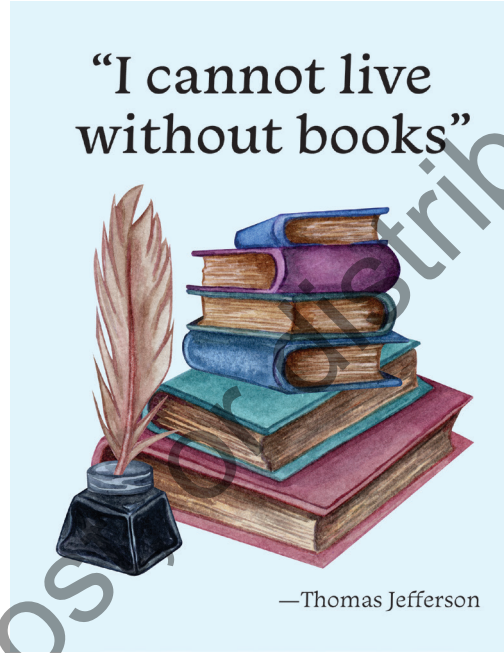
7. **Expressions of Anger.** Some students move quickly into anger when their sense of self is challenged. Students who haven't developed the capacity to protect themselves through such seemingly socially acceptable behaviors as withdrawal, contempt, or blame express their frustration and fear of shame through bursts of anger. This can look like loudly slamming a book shut, throwing something across the room, slamming a door, or even, at another end of the anger spectrum, going silent.
8. **Avoidance.** Our first signal that shame is internalized is avoidance. We tend to fear what we don't know or what we've consistently failed at, which in my opinion is the opposite of a growth mindset. (However, telling a student to have a growth mindset could create further shame because a teacher is ignoring the student's authentic feelings about how they see themselves or their potential in a given setting.) Avoidance is meant to preserve ourselves, to avoid being reminded (again) of what we can't do. I've found students who avoid reading aren't doing so out of defiance, but a sheer lack of understanding of how a middle-grade novel works and what they should take away from the experience.

From "Good Readers" to Authentic Readers

While the behaviors above may look very different, they all are signs of the same thing: students coping in an environment where they are challenged to define themselves in relationship to a fixed external identity. Reading, maybe more than any other subject or skill taught in school except perhaps writing, is tightly tied up with individual development and self-worth. We know that when students read and write they are also carrying on a conversation with themselves, or they should be. (We discuss this in Chapter 4.) Reading can allow students to explore ideas, feelings, and subjects they may learn to love or already love. Reading will be the medium through which they discover themselves and the world. This is what authentic reading is, and it is what most of us want for our students.

Perhaps you tell your students, as I have done, over and over, what an amazing gift learning to read is, how it will make them powerful,

and give them options. Maybe you share your own experiences about how much you loved reading, how it changed your life when you were a child and continues to enrich your life. Maybe you put up posters in the classroom like these:



On the surface, these messages are positive and certainly benign. Until they aren't.

To a student who doesn't really like to read, a student who hasn't yet established their own connection to reading, a student who wants to please but may not be fully mastering the range of skills and strategies we are teaching, what messages do these sentiments send?

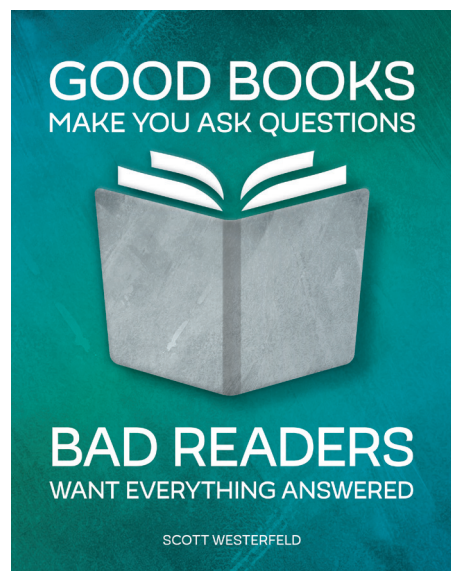
- ▶ “Read to Imagine” Does *that mean I can't imagine if I don't read?* (Alternate: *Was I supposed to imagine something?*)
- ▶ “I cannot live without books”—Thomas Jefferson *Well I can!*
- ▶ “I Read” *Well I don't. And maybe I never will. Or Sure I read. I'm at a level 50. I'm on grade level, which means I don't need to read much.*
- ▶ “There is no such thing as too many books.” *Really? Have you seen my teacher's classroom?*

We have become very sensitive as a society to messages and images that present unrealistic ideals to young people, in particular, unrealistic ideals about what their bodies should look like. We call this body shaming. But what about the intellectual and educational ideals we dangle in front of our students on a daily basis? How are these different? Just because we value reading doesn't mean that students aren't sensitive to how they don't measure up.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the language we often use when we present reading strategies to students. Let me first say, I teach the strategies. They are invaluable. Developing productive and effective reading habits, and learning to be active readers, is critical. But so is how we position those strategies with readers (Fisher et al., 2020). When we tell students, “This is what good readers do,” we are telling them:

- ▶ there are good readers (and this means there are bad readers),
- ▶ they are not good readers if they cannot do these specific things,
- ▶ the path to becoming a good reader is narrow and specific, and
- ▶ good readers love reading (like there's nothing else to do).

When searching for posters to use as examples, I came across this one. It stands apart as



certainly less benign than the others, but I'm including it because I think its stark and unforgiving message reveals the dark side of elevating good readers while emphasizing the moral failings of the "bad readers," who, it is implied here, are lazy and entitled.

Vulnerability as a Path to Authentic Reading

A strong and powerful path to authentic reading can be forged using the literature on shame as a guide. Many of you may be familiar with shame researcher Brené Brown. Her books on shame, vulnerability, and courage are regularly on the bestseller lists. Brown describes what she discovered in her more than a decade of research on shame. It's our fear of shame, says Brown (2017), and struggle for worthiness that causes us to retreat from complexity by making "everything that's uncertain, certain," to seek perfection in ourselves and work hard to make our children perfect, and to retreat into blaming and an insistence on our own invulnerability. It's no surprise then that Brown positions a willingness to be vulnerable as the antidote to shame. In her talks, she identifies vulnerability as the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging, innovation, and change. As teachers, we know that the most profound learning happens when we can embrace what we don't know, risk making mistakes, and open ourselves to uncertainty.

Brené Brown positions a willingness to be vulnerable as the antidote to shame.

The reading poster on page 13 says, "Good Books Make You Ask Questions. Bad Readers Want Everything Answered." Ignoring, for a moment, the destructive underlying messaging to students that they fall into one of two camps, the enlightened readers of good books or bad readers, it is no surprise that the poster associates bad readers with wanting all the answers. If bad reading is about wanting certainty, then good reading is about moving into uncertainty. While this is not something we want to tell students—it's the telling part that is

truly destructive—it is a message that can inform and drive the choices we make as teachers and the way we frame the challenge of teaching reading.

To help students move away from certainty, we need to help them be *vulnerable*, removing students from the burden they carry because of complex relations, or the multiple intersections between the teacher (e.g., personality and pedagogy), curriculum (e.g., standards, programs, and hidden agendas), and the student (e.g., personality, experience, and abilities), which are all well beyond the control of the student (Jaeger, 2015). Promoting vulnerability requires more than simply following the guidelines for creating a safe space to learn. Vulnerability cannot be nurtured in an environment that insists on defining success in terms of performance and measurement against an ideal. Instead, we as teachers need to make critical shifts in how we view our job as teachers of reading.

*Vulnerability cannot be nurtured in an environment
that insists on defining success in terms of
performance and measurement against an ideal.*

As I indicated earlier in this chapter, we need to put the curriculum in the background and put students squarely in the foreground. What does this look like? It means changing what we privilege, value, and choose to emphasize in every interaction with students, in every decision about how we structure our classrooms, in how we plan for the year, in how we assess students, and in how we develop instruction. In this book, you will find practical, if not *disruptive*, advice on making these shifts. You will find specific ideas for language to use and ways to productively scaffold traditional reading curricula. But these are ideas, illustrations, and models. They represent what has worked for me in my practice to focus on preparing students to learn, take risks, be vulnerable, or, as Brown (2015) suggests in the title of her book, *Daring Greatly*. I wouldn't presume to offer these ideas as ideals of practice that you should judge yourself against. That would subvert the very thinking that informs what I am presenting here. Instead, I hope they show you that there is a different way and that they spark the thinking that will allow you to also dare greatly when it comes to reaching out to your students.

Changing Our Priorities: Five Critical Value Shifts

The shifts I describe here didn't come fast, and they didn't come easily. Years of training, my own struggles, fears, and my concern with my professional reputation often got in my way.

As I mentioned early on in this chapter, I was once a successful reading teacher—according to reading achievement scores. My students' (state test) scores always improved, and most met standards. My identity was wrapped up in these scores, and I didn't want to lose that. Then things went wrong. Terribly wrong. As I started reading shame research, I became aware of the limits of their engagement in reading, mostly associated with self-perception and self-efficacy. The more I became aware that their high test scores did not coincide with a real interest in reading or ability to deeply comprehend text, the less tolerance I had for business as usual. So slowly and gradually I began to experiment, taking risks, and changing things up. The more I experimented, the more my students saw themselves as readers. The more my focus and priorities shifted, the more I focused on the uniqueness of the readers and the students' needs rather than my own self-interest, the more I was able to let go of pressures like the need to get high test results. In short, I became more invested with my readers through the interpersonal bridge, which formed my new pedagogy. And quite frankly, the more I saw the reading attitudes in my readers shift and our relationships improve, the more our classroom reading culture improved. Did I mention that our benchmark and achievement scores improved, too?

As you read through these shifts, I urge you to think about your own practice, values, and priorities and where you might begin your own journey.

CRITICAL SHIFT #1: PRIORITIZING STUDENTS OVER CURRICULUM

If someone asked you, “What do you value more, your students or the curriculum?” you would likely answer, “Why my students, of course.” But ask yourself, what drives your planning for the year? The district-mandated program or your students' emotional, developmental, and cognitive needs? When you are preparing to teach any particular lesson, are you thinking, “How can I present this part of the curriculum as effectively as possible?” Or “Is this what my students need to learn right now?”

We are taught and expected to prioritize both the curriculum and students, finding some “sweet spot” where they meet and working to make that meeting as effective as possible. But even if such a sweet spot can be found, is it worth the effort? Is the prescribed curriculum a sacred text we are meant to honor and serve? The shift I am describing here flips that assumption on its head, positioning the curriculum as something that should be serving the student and the teacher in a mutual effort to help the student grow and learn. It is a tool, not a goal. As Jane Wellman-Little, literacy instructor at the University of Maine, once told me, “You are the silver bullet, not the program.”

In practice, this means:

- ▶ Holding off on teaching particular strategies, skills, or texts until you truly know your students are ready.
- ▶ Creatively implementing district pacing expectations when necessary.
- ▶ Not letting program or district assessments solely define student capacities and needs.
- ▶ Getting to know students as unique, independent readers.
- ▶ Helping students establish their own, authentic purposes for reading.
- ▶ Working one-on-one with students to help them learn how to engage in authentic assessment of their own reading capacities and determine areas for growth.
- ▶ Helping students be the authors of their own reading lives.

CRITICAL SHIFT #2: PRIORITIZING INTERPERSONAL BRIDGE

We all work to establish good relationships with students. We learn about their personal lives, listen to their stories, read their essays, hear about their fears and hopes, and meet with parents and sometimes siblings and other family members (Daniels & Pirayoff, 2015). But deliberately building the interpersonal bridge is entirely different and is a critical tool in building an authentic reading classroom where the shame factor plays little or no role. Remember, shame is rooted in relationship to others, so it’s not a surprise that one of the biggest factors in mitigating it depends on relationship building.

My professional beliefs further altered when I read about Kaufman’s (1993) concept of the **interpersonal bridge** in his landmark text,

Shame: The Power of Caring. Noted psychologist, professor at Michigan State University, and a pioneer of shame research, Kaufman explores the critical relationship between adult and child and the consequences when authority is prioritized over trust. He introduces the interpersonal bridge as a mechanism for building trust, mutuality, and amending relationships. One important feature of the interpersonal bridge, which is not often supported or valued in teacher-student relationships, is *mutuality of response*. Kaufman defines mutuality of response as “one is in a real relationship with another, in a word, to feel wanted for oneself” (p. 13). In other words, the relationship is about the student and the student alone. The reader is not a tool for providing data or evidence of growth but is a maturing reader who deserves guidance to incorporate reading into their lives based on the uniqueness of their individuality and with respect for their sense of self-efficacy and perceptions.

Kaufman later adds that this is the “basis for trust” within a relationship.

Now, this doesn’t mean we are on equal footing, or that I give up my role as teacher in an effort to “be a student’s friend.” In fact, just the opposite. Mutuality of response is about an open and authentic recognition of our shared needs and concerns. I need to teach and evaluate and guide, and the student needs to learn. But more important, I need to recognize the child as an individual first. I need to recognize that reading will not come just because I studied the data and applied the right intervention; it will come because the student had a trusting relationship with an adult who provided an avenue by which to become a reader. By focusing on where our interests meet and negotiating solutions, we build and strengthen the interpersonal bridge.

I need to teach and evaluate and guide, and the student needs to learn. But, I need to recognize the child as an individual first.

In practice this means:

- ▶ Listening to students from a place of humility and good faith, withholding suspicion and judgment, and not making assumptions about a student’s motives.
- ▶ Providing opportunities for open and clear communication about obstacles to learning.

- ▶ Soliciting and listening carefully to student feedback.
- ▶ Setting clear expectations and being willing to change them when they aren't working.
- ▶ Communicating my purposes and motivations as a teacher.
- ▶ Being careful not to impose my own or others' interests and enthusiasms on students.
- ▶ Being willing to ask students hard questions when necessary.
- ▶ Sitting side-by-side with the most apprehensive of readers, reading stories and engaging in "real talk" about what it's like to be a reader and struggle with reading.

CRITICAL SHIFT #3: PRIORITIZING STUDENT AUTONOMY OVER STUDENT DEPENDENCE

In a reading classroom focused on performance, test scores, and teacher appraisal, either in the form of praise or judgment, it is all too easy for students to become so dependent on external markers that their relationship with reading becomes distorted. We as teachers might work hard to offer choices when we can, but these choices, often in the context of independent reading, feel incidental and peripheral compared to the performance demands made of students daily. Making this shift doesn't necessarily mean ignoring performance demands, lowering expectations, or giving up authority in the classroom. As I once described (Stygles, 2014) in "Losing Control to Gain Readers," I had to let go of managing every aspect of a reader's development because I'd broken the cardinal rule, "never work harder than my students" (Jackson, 2018). I had to shift the accountability and adopt a relationship-based, student-centered approach (Cornelius-White, 2007), finding age-appropriate ways to give students ownership over their perception of competence (Gilbert, 2004) and performance, including assessment.

In practice this means:

- ▶ Teaching students about assessment—the different kinds, and their purposes and limitations.
- ▶ Helping students learn to assess and evaluate their own performance and make decisions about what to do in response.
- ▶ Using interactions with students—whole class, small group, and one-on-one—to reinforce where they have choices.

- ▶ Asking questions that put the responsibility back on students.
 - What do you think you should do next?
 - What is your intent?
 - What are you planning on doing?
 - What are your next steps?
 - What can you or do you need to do differently?
- ▶ Cultivating your own comfort with student discomfort as you make these shifts.
- ▶ Helping students develop their own goals and purposes.

CRITICAL SHIFT #4: PRIORITIZING VULNERABILITY OVER COMPLIANCE

No one likes feeling vulnerable, but as Brené Brown (2007) found in her research, the people who were the most courageous in their lives were the ones who had made friends with their own vulnerability. Reading requires courage. And learning to read requires that students and teachers both are willing to take risks, make mistakes, cultivate judgment and the courage to act on it, and finally communicate honestly about the whole enterprise—together. Student autonomy is dependent on students' willingness to look honestly and clearly at what they need to learn versus simply following teachers' directives. For instance, every year I struggle with one student. The student always follows the same pattern. In previous grades, the student was considered gifted. Through compliance, punctuality, and saintly behavior, they gained the favor of the teachers. Terms like responsible, respectful, and sweet were words used to describe them. Yet never once did they have to prove evidence of their reading or comprehension. They had high test scores, designations, and completed work that portrayed an image of their "giftedness." But after 2 months in my class, the same student was seemingly anxious. They felt they had "fallen out of favor."

And every year I wondered why, until my research uncovered the answer. This student forsakes involvement in the development of their own identity by becoming a people pleaser (a shame-based manifestation). The student also develops anxiety (also a shame-based manifestation), not out of fear, but because any previous understanding of success was irrelevant in my classroom. Since their internalized identity as a "good" reader was borne from compliance and perfect-score worksheets, they now felt and experienced "failure" because they had to demonstrate something unfamiliar—revealing their perceptions—which they didn't know how to do. In this, I realized I had to teach them.

It's safe to think if we comply with all the district's mandates and train our students to complete their work based on these programs and mandates, things will go smoothly. There's less mental anguish for us, and we don't fall out of favor, meaning we secure the validation we desire from our leaders. But who does this really help? Where does this leave our readers?

What I've come to learn is that the responsibility of learning to read (or failing to)—that is, managing a reading life, strategically reading, and developing a reading identity—often falls solely on the student. In other words, they are often left alone to figure out what this “love of reading” or “lifelong reader” thing is all about. It's no wonder they quit. For one, why would you do anything nobody notices you for? Worse, what if you do it and you're still not accepted? Or the student might think, “Plainly I have other things to do that I enjoy that don't require someone else's judgment.” These then force the hand of compliance.

It's safe to think if we comply with all the district's mandates and train our students to complete their work based on these programs and mandates, things will go smoothly.

Directives and compliance are not conducive to authentic learning and reading. Compliance will not create lifelong readers out of struggling ones.

Compliance will not create lifelong readers out of struggling ones.

To shift away from compliance in practice means doing the following:

- ▶ Modeling healthy vulnerability every day in your role as teacher. “Oops! I blew that, didn't I? Okay, kiddos, let's try that one more time.”
- ▶ Creating a classroom culture that values vulnerability by allowing kids to share their perspectives, embrace inquiry, and acknowledge error with the opportunity to amend behavior rather than be punished or “held accountable.”

- ▶ Sharing your learning and mistakes, using personal stories as appropriate. I'm never afraid to tell kids about my failures in school or struggles. This creates empathy and connection while modeling resiliency.
- ▶ Gently and respectfully insisting on student risk-taking in whole-class, small-group, and one-on-one discussions. Encouraging students to model self-expression and support peers.
- ▶ Guiding reluctant students into class discussion.
- ▶ Letting yourself be vulnerable enough to listen to student feedback and change plans accordingly.

CRITICAL SHIFT #5: PRIORITIZING LONG-TERM STUDENT DEVELOPMENT OVER SHORT-TERM MASTERY

When I teach my students, I don't ignore the importance of mastery of discrete skills. However, I do prioritize teaching and learning that invests in long-term development over the immediate measurement of discrete skills. Discrete skills, while important, are not the overall mission. Developing an authentic purpose to interact with a text is. And it takes time.

Where does that leave you? My answer is that you are left with the classic paradox: Sometimes we need to do less to achieve more. Building the kind of classroom culture that allows and encourages vulnerability and risk-taking, autonomy, and strong relationships through the interpersonal bridges with students may not look at first like progress. But progress can be deceptive. Remember Angelina, the student who identified as a level 50 reader? She was a master at fulfilling expectations; that is, she completed the assigned tasks and mastered specific skills outlined in our curriculum, yet she didn't know how to engage with a text. Her comprehension was narrow and fleeting. Working with her required starting from scratch and going backward for a while before we could go forward.

Window or Mirror?

Before we talk about how to begin this work with students and what the critical shifts, previously discussed, look like in practice, I'd like to pause and encourage you to reflect on your own views about reading.

As educators, we can be very fond of metaphors. One of the most popular metaphors about readers and text is *Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors* (Sims, 1990).

At first blush, we often talk of reading as opening a window into discovering ourselves through text and characters (Johnson et al., 2017). On the surface, this sounds exciting, but in emphasizing what is external, the world outside the window, what are we inviting students to think and do? It's great to see ourselves in reading, but what happens if we come to believe we are not good readers in the first place? What if our first barrier is the question, "Am I valued as a reader by my teacher?" In this case, I am offering a slant on the metaphor by suggesting that "windows and mirrors" is more than seeing oneself in a text through characters. It's also about seeing oneself as a capable, competent reader in the way that a student interacts with text and how they are seen by peers, teachers, and parents. Our thoughts or perceptions about what others believe we can do has a resounding impact on our ability to engage in relationships, and ultimately, to learn. Here, I want students to see themselves as readers. We are the mirrors that reflect that image back to students.

While I agree that learning can prepare students to meet and know the wide, wide world beyond themselves, by emphasizing the value of this world for students, by telling them what they should be seeing through the window, we run the risk of turning this window into a negative and destructive mirror of themselves. Let's consider Angelina.

Mr. Stygles: "Angelina, what do you think of yourself as a reader?"

Angelina: "I suck at reading!"

Mr. Stygles: "Wow! What makes you say that?"

Angelina: "My reading teacher told me in fourth grade."

Mr. Stygles: "What do you mean? You had a reading teacher?"

Angelina: "Yeah. She came and took a few of us out of the class because we were bad at reading."

Mr. Stygles: "Did she tell you that you 'sucked'?"

Angelina: "No. I just knew because I was in a special reading group. We were the ones who couldn't keep up with the other kids in the class."

(Continued)

(Continued)

- Mr. Stygles:** “What makes you think you don’t read very well?”
- Angelina:** “I’m slow. I get some words wrong when I read.”
- Mr. Stygles:** “How do you know you are slow?”
- Angelina:** “Every time I go to her class I have to read aloud. She makes these marks on the paper. When I am reading, I look over to see what she is marking down. She crosses out the words I have a hard time with. I don’t read perfectly like the other kids. I just suck at it. It’s boring.”
- Mr. Stygles:** “Is there any other reason you don’t read well?”
- Angelina:** “I don’t get to read a lot. I have a baby brother at home so there is no time. We live in a small apartment over by the gas station. He’s crying all the time, and there is no place to read. I want to read; I just can’t.”

If we pause and consider what Alice Miller (1997) teaches us, do we respond to Angelina’s “legitimate need to be noticed, understood, and taken seriously?” If we do, we can find a wealth of information—the data points that we’re really looking for and the ones that will help prevent shame in the future.

On the surface, Angelina describes a situation in which she’s been defined as a reader and where her perception of the teacher’s view of her defines her self-worth. She is looking into the mirror at her own performance. Further, she’s denied the capability of looking through the window the text might provide. Through this simple interaction of Angelina’s reading, the window has been transformed into a mirror, a mirror of the teacher’s making, which reflects back to Angelina a vision of herself as someone who “sucks” at reading.

But let’s say the teacher takes a different approach, and instead, reflects back to Angelina praise for her work. What if the teacher were writing things like, *Well done! Excellent work! You really managed to read that one line very well.* Is that better? I would say no, it isn’t. Approval comes from the teacher, not necessarily from within because this is still a mirror of the teacher’s making. This is where shame thrives and where student agency, self-assessment, and motivation go to die.

So what are we to do? My answer is both complex and deceptively simple: We need to alter how we serve as a mirror for students and focus our teaching on guiding students to find their own mirror, one in which they recognize who they really are as readers.

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I haven't found all the answers. Teaching students to read, let alone developing independent readers, is a complicated process, part art, part science, and full of mystery. But I have learned some things about helping students see themselves clearly as readers and develop confidence and agency, while not sacrificing rigor, which I share in the following pages.

Reflect and Act

Use these reflection questions to consider the information shared in the chapter and how you can apply it in your own classroom.

1. How has this chapter altered your thinking about what shame is?
2. What critical shifts have you sought to make, and how does this chapter support your thinking?
3. Think of a student who challenges you. What is it they might really be looking for or signaling to you about?

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