

INTRODUCTION: “WHY SHOULD I READ?”

Not long ago I escorted a ninth-grade class to the school library with directions that every student was to check out a book by the end of the period. After a brief tour of the various sections and a lesson on how to locate titles, authors, and genres, the students were given forty minutes to make their selections. Because it was the beginning of a new year and I was interested in getting them started as readers, I asked the students to choose something they would enjoy reading—something recreational, rather than academic, in nature.

Some students (most likely those who were already readers) found books quickly. Others took more time, perusing a number of books before deciding on titles they could live with. As the period progressed, students who had made their choices sat down and began reading. With five minutes to go, I noticed one student, Richard, still searching for a book.

Richard considered and returned at least twenty books to the shelves during our short visit to the library. Nothing looked good to him. I quietly approached him and tried to find out what his interests were. Richard told me he liked baseball, so we located a small section of baseball books. As Richard and I looked at every baseball book in the library collection, and as he rejected each of them one by one, I could see his frustration mounting. Standing in that library and looking at the sour look on Richard’s face, one might have thought that instead of choosing a book I had asked him to don an orange vest and spend his school year collecting trash along the highway. After rejecting the last baseball title on the shelf, Richard, in exasperation, turned to me and said, “I like baseball, but I don’t like to read. Reading is boring and pointless. Why should I read?”

Have you ever been asked a question that has so many obvious answers that you have difficulty formulating any answer at all? “Why should I read?” is that kind of question for me. When Richard asked me that question, so many possible answers ran simultaneously through my mind that a sort of rush-hour gridlock ground all my responses to a halt. In trying to decide which answer was the best to start with, my brain became as jammed as a Toys “R” Us parking lot three days before Christmas. Having only a minute remaining in the class period did not help matters. How does one even begin to suggest the

depth and richness to be had from reading? Ask Julia Child why she cooks or Yo-Yo Ma why he plays the cello and see if they can answer in a minute or less.

When my last class left that day, I sat down and, with Richard in mind, jotted down all the reasons why I read. The next day, I asked the class to do the same. As a group, we brainstormed all the reasons we should be readers. I wrote their reasons on an overhead transparency; and, after some revising and regrouping, a list of nine major reasons why we should all be readers emerged. I proposed to the students that we repeatedly revisit each of these reasons as the year progressed, and I told them I would share any research I came across to validate their reading reasons.

Thus a journey to explore answers to the question “Why should I read?” began. I wanted answers that adolescents would find meaningful. Answers that would resonate with my students. Answers that would allow them to see the importance reading has in the lives of literate people. Answers they could internalize and believe in long after leaving my class.

I didn’t know it at the time, but that day was the genesis of this book. A quest for reading reasons had begun.