I cannot read that good. I don’t like to read that much. It’s true. Everyone knows I can’t read.” Antony; eighth-grade student [September]

“I am getting better at reading. I would say I am a good reader. I read more now. I read every day! I think my teachers should make me read even more. I would like to be a great reader,” Antony [December]

“I am a great reader. I understand more of what I read than ever before. I read every day, even in school!” Antony [April]

When I met Antony (all names are pseudonyms) in September, he was an eighth-grade student in Ms. Winters’s English class. His most recent test scores indicated that he read on a fourth-grade level.

Ms. Winters explained that he had barely passed the seventh grade and had a history of failing to complete assignments. She was concerned that he might drop out when he reached high school because of his difficulties with reading. “If his reading doesn’t improve,” she said, “then I think he’ll get frustrated and quit—just completely quit.”

In our initial interactions, Antony told me he did not enjoy reading in school and normally did not complete reading assignments. He said that he was “not a good reader” and often did not understand the texts his teachers assigned.

Reading in school had always been difficult for him, he said. However, Antony also said he wanted to improve his reading abilities and better understand the texts his teachers gave him. Doing so, he said, would “feel good. Like I accomplished something.”

What happened to Antony between September and April that contributed to a change in his reading habits and the transition from identifying himself as someone who could not read well to someone who was a great reader? One thing that Antony experienced was a shift in how texts and reading instruction were presented to him in his English class. Rather than focus instruction around teacher-selected reading skills and texts, Ms. Winters and I created instruction that was grounded in helping students evolve into the kinds of readers they wanted to become.
Creating such instruction was an iterative, ongoing process that required us to understand how students identified themselves as readers, how they arrived at their conclusions, and how they wanted their identities as readers to change. For example, while Antony identified himself as a “bad reader” at the start of the school year, he also said he wanted to think of himself as a “good reader” by the end of eighth grade.

Rather than trying to force students like Antony to take up and enact our understandings of what it meant to be a good reader, both in general and in English specifically, we engaged them in discussions and experiences about how they wanted to improve their reading, what they needed to do to achieve their goals, and how we could assist them along the way. As a result, students’ experiences with reading evolved into a partnership between the student and Ms. Winters. La meta del papel:

In this commentary, I discuss what reading identities are and how they are defined, created, and enacted in schools by teachers and students. I then consider the positive and negative consequences associated with asking students to take up institutionalized norms around reading.

Finally, I share how we can create spaces for students to talk back and rewrite the identities often forced on them by schools. I conclude by discussing the importance of creating reading partnerships between teachers and students.

What Is a Reading Identity?

The term reading identity refers to how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, the value they place on reading, and their understandings of what it means to be a particular type of reader within a given context (Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Wortham, & Mosley, 2010; McRae & Guthrie, 2009). Students’ reading identities are created over time based on their experiences in school and their understandings of the different identities available to them.

In school, the reading identities often made available to students are limited to such descriptions as poor/struggling, average, and good/excellent. Reading identities are often constructed in terms of skills—what students can or cannot do with academic texts—and do not take into account the variety and depth of literacy practices students may engage in beyond traditional school reading (O’Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009).

Collective understandings about the available identities serve as a framework for teachers to understand students and for students to understand themselves and their peers (Wortham, 2006).

Students have extensive opportunities to consider what it means to be a certain type of reader in school (i.e., good reader, poor reader) and where they fall within this continuum. They have been placed into categories and assigned reading identities by teachers or peers based on things such as test scores, reading levels, and how they engage with texts. Students are very aware of the identities they have been assigned, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, and they are capable of discussing their understandings of what these assigned identities mean as well as what they do and do not capture about them as readers (Hall, Greene, & Watts, 2011).

Understanding students’ reading identities can provide insight into the decisions they make about texts (Hall, 2010). Students who identify as poor readers may withdraw from reading in school not because they want to but because their prior experiences suggest they will not succeed or make improvements.

Students who identify as good readers are more likely to try to read texts and apply reading instruction. However, they may also think that because they are good readers they do not need further instruction or to change how they engage with texts (Hall & Nellenbach, 2009).

What gets ignored in the rhetoric of helping students become “good readers” is that doing so requires more than helping them learn specific skills. It requires a shift in their identities (McFarland & Pals, 2005). As students are being instructed to engage with texts in particular ways, they are also being told to rethink and change who they are and reconfigure themselves to institutionalized norms.
It is not that these norms are always bad. However, it is important to recognize that the characteristics associated with becoming a good reader in school are often not open to scrutiny or discussion. Students are expected to have or be working toward acquiring the good reader identity as defined by someone else. Expecting students to assimilate into a school-based culture of reading automatically sets some up to be identified as good readers and others as poor ones. Until we start to recognize, understand, confront, and undo these norms we will continue to create both good and poor readers.

Rewriting Identities

Rewriting identities is about helping students find their voices and engage with texts in ways that are meaningful to them. It is not about accepting and assimilating students into the already existing structures of reading identities in school. It is not about understanding what it means to be a good reader as defined by teachers, peers, or test makers, and then helping students acquire those particular traits.

Creating space for students to rewrite their identities requires students and teachers to shed the typical labels we typically use to understand each other and ourselves as readers. Students must learn how to craft their own understandings of what it means to read, to be a reader, and to have space for their ideas to evolve.

For example, Antony had a long history of reading difficulties in school that played an important role in his reading identity. While he wanted to improve, he did not see how it could be done. A typical approach to working with Antony might be to have him read more, give him more books for his reading level, or provide him with a remedial reading class.

While such things might be of some help to Antony, they do not acknowledge his past experiences as a reader, his current reading identity, or his ideas about how he wants to grow as a reader. If anything, such experiences stand to reinforce his identity that he is a poor reader in school by attempting to engage him with approaches that he knows are for students with reading difficulties.

Although schools try to shape students into particular types of individuals, it is ultimately up to each student to decide who they want to become and what they are and are not willing to do. Therefore, helping students rewrite their reading identities involves an understanding and questioning of existing reading identities and disrupting the patterns that students have experienced with reading in school.

Teachers can support students in rewriting their reading identities and becoming the kinds of readers they desire. The next section describes the process Ms. Winters and I engaged in to do just that.

The Role of Identity in Reading Instruction and Development

Ms. Winters and I spent one year working to develop instruction that responded to students’ current identities as readers and helped them rewrite their identities to become the kinds of readers they wanted to be. We focused on one English/Language Arts class that met every day for 50 minutes following lunch. Twenty students were in the class. Fourteen were considered to be reading below their grade level and needed extra help in reading.

Ms. Winters was in her ninth year as a middle-school English teacher at Hazelwood Middle School. She had a master’s degree in reading and was chair of the English Department. Ms. Winters said she required students to read daily, but the district did not mandate what books her students needed to read.

It was important to Ms. Winters that her students connected with the texts they read. Reading classic literature was important, she said, but not as important as helping students learn how to use texts to understand themselves and their world.

In the sections that follow, I outline three approaches that Ms. Winters and I engaged in to help students understand the institutionalized norms around reading, give them the space to challenge and rewrite these norms, and help them to become the kinds of readers they wanted to be. Despite the order in which they are presented, the techniques are not meant to be seen as a prescribed approach and can be used in any order. Ms. Winters and I found that we needed to shift back and forth between each technique over the course of the year.
Students also noted that it was their teachers who assigned their reading identities, often based on test scores, and that these identities came with positive and negative consequences. For example, students noted that if you were considered to be a good reader in school, you had greater access to more interesting and challenging books.

If you were considered to be a poor reader, “you get to do more worksheets and all the books are dumb and boring.” Students also said they did not always agree with the identities that they were assigned in school, noting that teachers were not always aware of what they read on their own or what they wished they could read during school.

Students indicated they could be the kinds of readers they wanted to be when at home. While they did have to complete assigned readings for school, students also recognized that at home they were generally free to simply read.

As one student stated, “[at home] People just read. There are no labels.” Another student said, “I read a lot of things [at home] that I don’t get to read at school because it’s not on my level. I don’t care about my level at home. Whatever that is.”

(2) Developing and Refining Reading Identities

As students explored what it meant to be a reader at home and school, we worked to understand their current reading identities and how they wanted their identities to develop over the year. In September, students completed a short questionnaire responding to such questions as, “How would you describe yourself as a reader?” and “How would you like to describe yourself as a reader?”

Students completed the questionnaire again in January and April. Their responses helped Ms. Winters and I understand how their reading identities were evolving. During the months in between, we asked students if they were making progress in developing their reading identities and what evidence they had to support their progress or what they believed was preventing them from moving forward. We also asked...
students to identify things they could do differently that might help them progress as readers and what we could do to help as well.

At the beginning of the year most students made negative statements about their reading identities. Students said things like “I am a slow reader” and, “I am a bad reader.”

However, students said only positive things about who they would like to become in the future including, “I want to be a well reader who understands the text” and, “I want to be a great reader who can pronounce hard words.” When asked what they might do to help them achieve their goals, students’ responses included, “Read every day,” “I should stop and think more about what I’m reading,” and “Talk to someone about what I read.”

Students also had thoughts on how their teachers could help them become the kinds of readers they envisioned. Their most common recommendation was for teachers to provide them with more time to read challenging texts in school. Students believed they did not spend enough time reading in school and that this lack of time prevented them both from learning content and improving as readers.

While students thought that having input and choice on the texts they read was important, they also wanted their teachers to assign difficult, subject-matter appropriate texts. They believed that a balance could be created that drew on their knowledge and interests, as well as their teachers’ knowledge and experiences, and would result in exposure to a greater variety of texts and information.

In addition, students wanted teachers to provide them with a list of challenging books that they could self-select to read on their own. These books could extend student learning or be chosen for enjoyment. As one student explained,

I need to read ‘cause I need to understand more things. But I don’t always know what to read. Like, what will help me be better at reading? I don’t know. If my teachers can give me hard books to read I think that would help.

(3) Connecting Instruction

Ms. Winters and I reviewed the questionnaires and regularly discussed our interactions with students in order to create instruction that would help them make progress toward their reading identities while improving their abilities to comprehend English texts. We first identified areas that were important to students such as improving vocabulary, learning how to comprehend challenging texts, or providing more time to read. Then, Ms. Winters engaged students in lessons that responded to these areas.

An important component to the instruction was the language Ms. Winters used when talking to her students about reading. The first step we took was to eliminate the use of the terms good reader and poor reader. We knew students had deep understandings of these terms and a long history with them in school. Instead, we simply talked about reading.

Rewriting identities required students to examine and change long-standing habits, attitudes, and beliefs about reading. If we wanted students to rewrite their identities, we had to stop using the language they had always heard and to provide them space to break free from old models.

During lessons, Ms. Winters made explicit connections between reading instruction and assignments and how engaging in them could help students achieve their reading identities. For example, Ms. Winters taught a unit on survival in February. After an initial discussion of the term survival, she asked students to draw a picture that showed what they thought it meant. She explained how drawing the picture would help their reading identities evolve:

How does this help you with reading? A lot of you have said that you want to be able to read and understand more difficult books. In reading, you have to visualize different ideas and concepts like survival and then use those understandings to help you make sense of the story. That’s partly what we’re working on here—visualizing a concept and showing how we understand it. And then later on, as we read stories about survival, we can visualize different aspects of it to help us understand it better.

In this example, Ms. Winters was able to bridge students’ beliefs about what they needed help on with what she needed to teach. Students’ could incorporate evolving ideas about reading and how they wanted to grow as readers into everyday instruction. Ms. Winters also introduced skills that students had not requested, such as visualizing, and showed them how...
she believed they could use them to achieve their reading identities.

Students generally responded positively. Antony said, "I have a lot to learn, and I know some of what I need. But she [Ms. Winters] knows a lot and what she says helps me. It helps me learn things I didn't know I needed to learn." As a result, both Ms. Winters and the students were able to have collaborative discussions about reading development, what texts should be read, and the different ways one could engage with them.

**Creating Reading Partnerships**

At the beginning of the school year, most students indicated that it was their teachers’ responsibility to help them become better readers. Students believed teachers should tell them what kind of reader they were (i.e., good or poor), select books for them, and provide them with instruction on reading skills. Their ideas about reading and reading instruction suggested they viewed their reading development as largely a passive process and one where they held little ownership.

Over time students’ attitude shifted and they began to see themselves as playing a primary role in their development as readers. Developing their reading identities and reading abilities became a partnership that required participation from both students and Ms. Winters.

This partnership provided space for students to rewrite their identities and take control over their reading development. Students communicated their interests and needs to Ms. Winters. She responded by incorporating these things and showing them additional skills and books that would help them achieve their goals.

Starting such a process may seem daunting, but it is manageable if you keep a few things in mind.

First, remember that the primary goal is to help students develop as readers and learn the content within a given discipline. Everything that you do is connected back to your curriculum and what students need to learn. Incorporating reading instruction, and helping students rewrite their reading identities, is not an additional thing to do. It is a way to reconfigure your instruction and step up what is already happening.

Second, find a way for your students to regularly provide you with input on how they would like to improve as readers or what they would like to learn within the discipline. Show students you are listening to them by explicitly incorporating their concerns into classroom life.

Finally, challenge your students to push beyond their initial ideas about reading and learning in school. The students in Ms. Winter's class wanted to be heard and to have their concerns addressed. However, they also saw their teacher as a person who knew more than them and had much to offer. Once they saw that their ideas about reading and learning had a valued space in the classroom, they wanted their teacher to take them further.

**References**


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