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THE FUTURE OF READING

A New Assignment: Pick Books You Like

By **MOTOKO RICH**

JONESBORO, Ga. — For years Lorrie McNeill loved teaching “To Kill a Mockingbird,” the [Harper Lee](#) classic that many Americans regard as a literary rite of passage.

But last fall, for the first time in 15 years, Ms. McNeill, 42, did not assign “Mockingbird” — or any novel. Instead she turned over all the decisions about which books to read to the students in her seventh- and eighth-grade English classes at Jonesboro Middle School in this south Atlanta suburb.

Among their choices: James Patterson’s adrenaline-fueled “Maximum Ride” books, plenty of young-adult chick-lit novels and even the “Captain Underpants” series of comic-book-style novels.

But then there were students like Jennae Arnold, a soft-spoken eighth grader who picked challenging titles like “A Lesson Before Dying” by Ernest J. Gaines and “The Bluest Eye” by [Toni Morrison](#), of which she wrote, partly in text-message speak: “I would have N3V3R thought of or about something like that on my own.”

The approach Ms. McNeill uses, in which students choose their own books, discuss them individually with their teacher and one another, and keep detailed journals about their reading, is part of a movement to revolutionize the way literature is taught in America’s schools. While there is no clear consensus among English teachers, variations on the approach, known as reading workshop, are catching on.

In New York City many public and private elementary schools and some middle schools already employ versions of reading workshop. Starting this fall, the school district in Chappaqua, N.Y., is setting aside 40 minutes every other day for all sixth, seventh and eighth graders to read books of their own choosing.

In September students in Seattle’s public middle schools will also begin choosing most of their own books. And in Chicago the public school district has had a pilot program in place since 2006 in 31 of its 483 elementary schools to give students in grades 6, 7 and 8 more control over what they read. Chicago officials will consider whether to expand the program once they review its results.

None of those places, however, are going as far as Ms. McNeill.

In the method familiar to generations of students, an entire class reads a novel — often a classic — together to draw out the themes and study literary craft. That tradition, proponents say, builds a shared literary culture among students, exposes all readers to works of quality and complexity and is the best way to prepare students for standardized tests.

But fans of the reading workshop say that assigning books leaves many children bored or unable to understand the texts. Letting students choose their own books, they say, can help to build a lifelong love of reading.

“I feel like almost every kid in my classroom is engaged in a novel that they’re actually interacting with,” Ms. McNeill said, several months into her experiment. “Whereas when I do ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ I know that I have some kids that just don’t get into it.”

Critics of the approach say that reading as a group generally leads to more meaningful insights, and they question whether teachers can really keep up with a roomful of children reading different books. Even more important, they say, is the loss of a common body of knowledge based on the literary classics — often difficult books that children are unlikely to choose for themselves.

“What child is going to pick up ‘Moby-Dick?’” said [Diane Ravitch](#), a professor of education at [New York University](#) who was assistant education secretary under President [George H. W. Bush](#). “Kids will pick things that are trendy and popular. But that’s what you should do in your free time.”

Indeed, some school districts are moving in the opposite direction. Boston is developing a core curriculum that will designate specific books for sixth grade and is considering assigned texts for each grade through the 12th.

Joan Dabrowski, director of literacy for Boston’s public schools, said teachers would still be urged to give students some choices. Many schools in fact take that combination approach, dictating some titles while letting students select others.

Even some previously staunch advocates of a rigid core curriculum have moderated their views. “I actually used to be a real hard-line, great-books, high-culture kind of person who would want to stick to Dickens,” said Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at [Emory University](#) and the author of “The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future.” But now, in the age of Game Boys and [Facebook](#), “I think if they read a lot of Conan novels or Hardy Boys or [Harry Potter](#) or whatever, that’s good,” he said. “We just need to preserve book habits among the kids as much as we possibly can.”

In Search of a Better Way

As a teenager growing up just a few miles from Jonesboro, Ms. McNeill loved the novels of [Judy Blume](#) and Danielle Steel. But in school she was forced to read the classics. She remembers vividly disliking “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” Still, she went on to teach it to her own students.

In 1999 she moved to Jonesboro Middle School, where more than 80 percent of the students are eligible for free lunches. Teachers there stuck to a curriculum prescribed by the county. Working with students designated as gifted, Ms. McNeill began teaching familiar novels like “Lord of the Flies” and “Mockingbird.” But she said, “I just never felt that they were as excited about reading as I wanted them to be.”

Ms. McNeill, an amateur poet whose favorite authors include [Barbara Kingsolver](#) and [Nick Hornby](#), wondered if forcing some students through a book had dampened their interest in reading altogether. She tried “literature circles,” in which a

smaller group chose a book to read together, and had some success. Then, in early 2008, she attended a professional seminar in Atlanta led by Nancie Atwell, the author of “In the Middle” and “The Reading Zone,” popular guidebooks for teachers that promote giving students widespread choice. “In the Middle” has sold nearly half a million copies since it was first published in 1987.

An Eye-Opening Experience

Over the last two decades, Ms. Atwell, along with Lucy M. Calkins, founding director of the Reading and Writing Project at [Columbia University](#)'s Teachers College, has emerged as a guru of the reading workshop approach. Ms. Atwell brings 45 teachers a year to her base of operations, the Center for Teaching and Learning, a small private school she founded in Edgecomb, Me., an hour north of Portland. Last September Ms. McNeill spent a week there with four other English teachers, each of whom had paid \$800, observing Ms. Atwell's work.

That first cool fall morning, 17 seventh- and eighth-grade students assembled for their reading and writing class in a large room overlooking a grove of birch and maple trees. Shelves of books ringed the room. The students flopped in forest green beanbag chairs set in a circle on the carpeted floor. At the front Ms. Atwell sat in a rocking chair, a small stack of volumes beside her.

Ms. McNeill watched closely, taking notes. After a session in which the students edited poems they had been writing, Ms. Atwell ceded the rocking chair to students, who gave short talks recommending books to their classmates.

One eighth grader presented “Getting the Girl” by Markus Zusak, the author of “The Book Thief,” a best-selling young-adult novel about the Holocaust that had been one of the boy's favorites. He highlighted the book's unusual line breaks and one-word sentences, concluding, “It's a fun, good read.”

When Ms. Atwell resumed her seat in the rocking chair, she pitched several titles she had read over the weekend. She held up “The Story of Edgar Sawtelle,” the novel by David Wroblewski that had been anointed by [Oprah Winfrey](#).

“It is just incredible,” she said, leaning forward. “It is about signing, dog-breeding, muteness, adolescence, the beauty of the American Midwest.” Before she could even lay it back on the floor, Maura Anderson, an eighth grader, asked if she could take it to start reading that afternoon.

In a 30-minute reading period that followed, each student hunkered low in a beanbag chair. Ms. Atwell moved quietly among them, coming in close for whispered conferences and noting page numbers to make sure each student had read at least 20 pages the night before.

One girl had “Nineteen Minutes” by Jodi Picoult, while a boy a few seats away read [Khaled Hosseini](#)'s novel “The Kite Runner.” Another boy was absorbed in “If I Die in a Combat Zone,” by [Tim O'Brien](#).

Throughout the week the teachers observed Ms. Atwell open each class with a mini-lesson about a poem as well as one in which she talked about research on how the brain learns to read fluidly.

Despite the student freedom, Ms. Atwell constantly fed suggestions to the children. She was strict about not letting them read what she considered junk: no [“Gossip Girl”](#) or novels based on video games. But she acknowledged that certain children needed to be nudged into books by allowing them to read popular titles like the “Twilight” series by Stephenie Meyer.

At the end of the first day the teachers discussed the demands of standardized testing and how some had faced resistance from administrators. Ms. McNeill said her students had so little freedom that they even had to be escorted to the bathrooms.

Suddenly she was overcome with emotion as she contrasted that environment with the student-led atmosphere in Ms. Atwell’s class. “It makes me sad that my students can’t have this every day,” she said, wiping away tears. “These children are so fortunate.”

Ms. Atwell reminded the teachers that she had once taught in a public school and faced strict requirements. “There is nothing that we are doing here that can’t be done in any public school,” she said. “The question is, how do you tweak these hidebound traditions of the institutions?”

Choice as a Motivator

Literacy specialists say that giving children a say in what they read can help motivate them. “If your goal is simply to get them to read more, choice is the way to go,” said Elizabeth Birr Moje, a literacy professor at the [University of Michigan](#). Ms. Moje added that choices should be limited and that teachers should guide students toward high-quality literature.

Though research on the academic effects of choice has been limited, some studies have shown that giving students modest options can enhance educational results. In 11 studies conducted with third, fourth and fifth graders over the past 10 years, John T. Guthrie, now a retired professor of literacy at the [University of Maryland](#), found that giving children limited choices from a classroom collection of books on a topic helped improve performance on standardized reading comprehension tests.

“The main thing is feeling in charge,” he said. Most experts say that teachers do not have to choose between one approach or the other and that they can incorporate the best of both methods: reading some novels as a group while also giving students opportunities to select their own books.

But literacy specialists also say that instilling a habit is as important as creating a shared canon. “If what we’re trying to get to is, everybody has read ‘Ethan Frome’ and [Henry James](#) and Shakespeare, then the challenge for the teacher is how do you make that stuff accessible and interesting enough that kids will stick with it,” said Catherine E. Snow, a professor at the [Harvard University](#) Graduate School of Education. “But if the goal is, how do you make kids lifelong readers, then it seems to me that there’s a lot to be said for the choice approach. As adults, as good readers, we don’t all read the same thing, and we revel in our idiosyncrasies as adult readers, so kids should have some of the same freedom.”

Ms. McNeill returned to Jonesboro determined to apply what she had observed. She knew she was luckier than some of the other teachers in the Edgecomb program, who were saddled with large classes and short periods. She had no more than 20 students in any class, for 100 minutes every day.

Trying to emulate the relaxed atmosphere of Ms. Atwell's classroom, Ms. McNeill pushed the desks out of their rows and against the white cinderblock walls. She placed a circle of carpet swatches on the tile floor and put a small wooden rocking chair at the front.

Her principal, Freda Givens, was supportive, persuaded by Ms. McNeill's enthusiasm. But Ms. McNeill warned her: "I am not sure how it's going to pan out on the standardized tests."

Ms. McNeill started to build her classroom library. All told, she spent about \$1,000 of her own money buying books, many of which were titles she had seen in Ms. Atwell's classroom, including "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle"; "The Road" by [Cormac McCarthy](#); and several novels by the young-adult favorites Walter Dean Myers and Sarah Dessen.

Modeling herself after Ms. Atwell, she began conducting sales pitches for books in her warm drawl and invited her students to do so, too. Every day Ms. McNeill allotted 30 minutes for the students to read on their own. Chatty, but firm if she detected that someone was not reading, she scooted from student to student on a lime-green stool, noting page numbers on a clipboard chart. She asked questions about the books and suggested new ones.

Many students began the year choosing books she regarded as too simple, and she prodded them to a higher level. After Khristian Howard, an earnest seventh grader, read "Chaka! Through the Fire," a memoir by the R&B star Chaka Khan, Ms. McNeill suggested that she try [Maya Angelou](#)'s autobiography, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

Khristian, who found the book tough at first, ended up writing an enthusiastic six-page entry in her journal. Ms. McNeill went on to suggest "The Bell Jar" by [Sylvia Plath](#) and "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" by Betty Smith, a book, Khristian wrote, that she "really didn't want to come to an end."

To help teach concepts like allegory or foreshadowing, Ms. McNeill began virtually every session by dissecting a poem that the class then discussed. One morning this spring Jabari Denson, an eighth grader, read aloud "Mother to Son" by [Langston Hughes](#). The class spent 15 minutes teasing out the metaphorical meaning of a line about "places with no carpet on the floor."

She required that the students record their impressions of each book, citing specific passages and analyzing themes. Jennae often wrote four or five pages in her tightly packed print. A year earlier she had been bored by reading and had little to say about books.

But now new worlds were opening. In January she read "It's Kind of a Funny Story," a novel by Ned Vizzini about a depressed teenager who ends up in a psychiatric ward. "After reading this book, I have decided that I want to be a psychologist," Jennae wrote in the spiral-bound notebook where she kept her journal. The book, she continued, had changed how she viewed mental illness.

“I think people that are labeled ‘crazy’ aren’t crazy at all; they just see the world differently than others,” she wrote. “They don’t really know how to express it correctly so nobody else knows how to accept it so they lock them away in a psych ward.”

Ms. McNeill did hit some snags. In January two of her students failed a state writing assessment. Over dinner one night with her husband, Dan McNeill, she confessed her fear that Ms. Givens, the principal, might not let her continue with her radical approach. But Ms. Givens did not interfere.

Ms. McNeill knew that students who were now being asked to write much more frequently about their reading might be tempted to copy the work of others. In March one of her most reluctant seventh graders plagiarized a journal entry about “Tomorrow, When the War Began,” a novel by John Marsden about children coping with an invasion of Australia. The boy did not even bother to remove the words “The Horn Book, starred review,” from the printout he pasted into his notebook.

She admonished the boy and asked him to redo his entry. She was discouraged to see that he wrote only one paragraph that amounted to not much more than a plot summary, concluding, “I highly recommend this book to young teens who like this kind of stuff.”

To Ms. McNeill’s chagrin, several students, most of them boys, stubbornly refused to read more challenging fare. One afternoon this spring she pulled her stool next to Masai, an eighth grader who wore a sparkling stud in one ear, as he stared at a laptop screen on which he was supposed to be composing a book review. Beside him sat the second volume in the “Maximum Ride” series, which chronicles the adventures of genetically mutated children who are part human, part bird. He was struggling to find anything to write.

“I keep trying to get you to read things other than James Patterson,” Ms. Atwell said, tapping the book’s cover. “But if you are going to write a book review of substance, you are going to have to find substance in the book.”

In staff meetings with fellow English teachers, Ms. McNeill showed them her students’ journals and explained her new teaching methods. A few were curious, but none were ready to give up their textbooks or class novels.

Some colleagues suggested that Ms. McNeill was only able to teach this way because of who was in her class. “Ms. McNeill has the freedom to do that because she teaches gifted students,” said Linda White, an eighth-grade teacher.

But in May Ms. McNeill felt vindicated when she received the results of her students’ performance on standardized state reading tests.

Of her 18 eighth graders, 15 exceeded requirements, scoring in the highest bracket. When the same students had been in her seventh-grade class, only 4 had reached that level. Of her 13 current seventh graders, 8 scored at the top.

In the final week of school Helen Arnold, Jennae’s mother, sent Ms. McNeill an e-mail message thanking her. “She never really just read herself for enjoyment until she took your class,” Ms. Arnold wrote.

Ms. McNeill knew she had not succeeded in persuading all of her students to read deeply or widely. But she was optimistic that she would capture a few more in the coming school year.

A week after her students left for the summer, Ms. McNeill boxed up the class sets of “To Kill a Mockingbird,” along with “Diary of [Anne Frank](#)” and “The Giver” by Lois Lowry, keeping just three copies of each for her collection. She carted the rest to the English department storeroom.