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# Igniting a Passion: A Model for Developing Reading Engagement with Teacher Candidates

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*I always loved reading as a child. My mother and I would take weekly trips to the library where I would always leave with no less than five books to read. It seemed that as my school work became more demanding towards the end of high school and all through college, I became less interested in reading for my own pleasure.*

– “Tara,” teacher candidate in *Children’s Literature*, Spring 2009

As more demands are placed on K-12 educators, so too are these demands placed on teacher educators. Implementing the Common Core Standards, facing the anxiety of teacher evaluation which is tied to student performance on high stakes testing, and endeavoring to keep up with new technology to enhance digital literacy can leave teachers at all levels exhausted. One of the first casualties of these demands, and their accompanying stress, is leisure reading. Smith (2012) asserted that teacher educators are faced with “the daunting task of preparing teachers of reading who measure up to the many standards that guide reading practice” (p. 9). Although it is necessary for teacher preparation courses to focus on how to teach the skills of reading, the affective component of reading education is often minimized (Layne, 2009). This omission directly impacts teacher candidates’ ability to meet the International Reading Association’s standards for reading professionals (International Reading Association, 2010). Specifically impacted is the need for candidates to create a literate environment, to model reading engagement for their students, and to continue to expand their personal repertoire of children’s literature in ways that will benefit their diverse students. Moreover, lack of reading for pleasure can impede a teacher’s ability to lead an interesting, fulfilling life outside of school: a component that Routman (2012) identifies as a key to being an effective teacher.

In their study that addressed the reading habits and literacy attitudes of in-service and prospective teachers, Nathanson, Pruslow, and Levitt (2008) reported that many teachers do not make “personal, leisure-time reading a priority” (p. 314). While this response may not be surprising to many literacy teacher educators, it is certainly disheartening. Nathanson et al. (2008) explained that this trend may stem from a “lack of passion for reading in literacy professionals” (p. 319). Consequently, when teachers who are non-readers are faced with students who resist reading, they cannot draw from their own personal love of reading to inspire these students. This fact, when coupled with the lack of preservice instruction of the affective domain means such teachers will lack the tools

to guide these students toward a love of leisure reading.

Fortunately, in their study on the reading habits of preservice teachers, Applegate and Applegate (2004) found that well-designed college courses can ignite the love of reading in teacher candidates. Teacher educators, therefore, should not only design experiences to prepare the knowledge and skills of teacher candidates, “but their hearts as well” (Nathanson et al.; 2008, p. 319). Teacher educators must address the reading lives of teacher candidates in addition to their other professional preparation (Commeyras, 2001).

Many educators would agree that teachers need to share their reading lives with their students (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Commeyras, 2001; Nathanson et al.; 2008; Routman, 2003). Routman stated, “I deliberately use my influence as a teacher and role model to foster a love of reading along with excellent reading habits” (2003, p. 23). This is essential not just for teachers of elementary school students, but for teacher educators as well. When teacher educators share their own purposes for reading, personal reading habits, and passion for reading with college students, they can help reignite their students’ love of reading that has often been buried under the burden of assigned school reading.

The lack of wide reading among teacher candidates can affect their coursework on many levels. For example, pre-service teachers often do not have a large repertoire of books to draw from, so they have difficulty integrating books into their designing of lesson plans. On the graduate level, literacy specialist candidates have difficulty finding books to inspire struggling or reluctant students to read. Consequently, teacher educators have a great responsibility to connect or reconnect students with leisure reading as a joyful experience. Teacher educators are obligated to design experiences in their college courses that provide multiple opportunities and models that encourage their candidates’ personal engagement in reading (Applegate & Applegate, 2004).

## The Model

To address the often neglected affective component of literacy teacher education, I decided to utilize my graduate course, *Children’s and Young Adult (YA) Literature*, to implement new techniques designed to help teacher candidates ignite or reignite their love of leisure reading. This article describes the instructional protocol implemented in the course and summarizes student response to the procedure. The steps involved in this instructional protocol are as follows: (a) setting the stage for change, (b) immersing students in inspiring literature with a capable guide, and (c) sustaining reading momentum throughout the semester.

## Step 1: Setting the Stage for Change

Fullan (1996) contends that there are several key lessons to enacting change of any kind: the first is that outside forces cannot mandate what matters to individuals. From this perspective, attempting to dictate attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs will eventually cause the change process to break down (Fullan, 1996). Consequently, professors cannot “assign” that students become passionate about personal reading, as compliance will only be surface level at best. Instead, opportunities must be provided for students to discover this need to read for themselves.

In Step One, the model provided teacher candidates with several opportunities to examine and discuss themselves as readers. The teacher candidates began the course by introducing themselves to each other. This introduction assignment asked students to indicate their favorite genre of literature and discuss what they were currently reading for pleasure. Many candidates could not name the last book they had read for fun. One student confided to the class that she had never read any text that was not assigned by a teacher.

Following the introductions, each teacher candidate was presented with several questions regarding their personal reading habits, adapted from Tunnel, Jacobs, Young and Bryan (2012). The teacher candidates used these questions to evaluate themselves as personal reading models for their students. The questions pertained to: (a) amount of pleasure reading done each week, (b) number of books in one’s personal children’s book library, (c) favorite children’s author, (d) favorite author for adults, and (e) title of books the student plans to read next. After answering the questions individually, the teacher candidates discussed their responses with each other. During this discussion, the teacher educator observed the body language of the teacher candidates. Many people ducked their heads like they were in trouble with the teacher. There was grimacing and much nervous laughter. When the class reconvened to talk as a whole, a few brave souls spoke for the class. The overwhelming consensus was that these teachers felt like inadequate reading models for their students. Given the level of embarrassment demonstrated by the teacher candidates, the teacher educator intentionally revealed her personal reading journey that began much like theirs. She, too, stopped reading for pleasure for a period of time until she was brought back to her passion for reading by a professor in graduate school. She assured the students that this course was designed to help them develop reading habits that would enable them to present a strong personal reading model to their own students.

## Step 2: Immersion into Inspiring Literature

Once candidates believed in the need to change their personal reading habits, the second step of the model required that the teacher educator inspire them to participate in wide, self-selected reading over the course of the semester. This necessitated immersion in

books that would capture their hearts and imaginations. Cambourne (1995) defines immersion as “the state of being saturated by, enveloped in, flooded by, steeped in, or constantly bathed in that which is to be learned” (p. 185). Consequently, candidates needed to be immersed in a large number of books at the beginning of the semester.

When real readers want to be enveloped by books, they go to the bookstore. There, book lovers are surrounded by the excitement of new titles, steeped in a wealth of authors, and bathed in the familiar warmth of favorite books which greet them like old friends. To provide this experience for students, the third class of the semester was held at a local bookstore. The bookstore visit consisted of three activities: a book talk, a scavenger hunt, and the completion of student-selected reading goals.

**Book talks.** The fieldtrip began with the whole class meeting in the children’s section. The teacher educator then shared children’s and young adult books that were carefully selected to pique the candidates’ interest from other areas of the bookstore that they might seldom frequent on their own. The book talks included graphic novels, teen lit, and science fiction. The teacher educator shared *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, by Brian Selznick and introduced them to *Baby Mouse*, by Jennifer Holme. She tantalized them with the mystery in *When You Reach Me*, by Rebecca Stead and explained the bleak future depicted in *The Hunger Games*, by Suzanne Collins. Every ounce of personal passion felt for these books was transmitted to the candidates in about 15-20 minutes of book talks by the professor.

**Novel contracts.** After the book talks, the teacher educator presented a novel contract for candidates to complete while at the bookstore. Candidates were required to list four novels they would read during the course and indicate a time-line for completing the novels throughout the 15 week semester. Novels could range from earlier readers to young adult literature, as well as include graphic novels. Additionally, candidates indicated why they chose each text on the contract, helping the teacher educator ensure that students were choosing books for a variety of reasons. See Appendix A for an abbreviated example of the novel contract.

In actuality, the teacher educator wanted and expected the students to read more than four books. However, knowing that many of her students already felt the pressures of work, home, and school, she realized that they would balk if she announced that they were expected to read 5–10 novels as well as 30–40 picture books, a textbook, and supplemental articles. Instead, she explained that they needed to read 2–4 chapter books depending on the length of the texts. They were to list four novels on the contract, but were allowed to write “optional” by the books they thought they might not have time to get to. The only requirement of the students in addition to having four novels was that one be outside of their “comfort zones.” For example, if they predominantly read historical fiction and professed

to hate science fiction, they might have one sci-fi novel on their contract. Students filled out the contract and signed it before leaving the store.

**Scavenger hunt.** To facilitate finding novels for the contract, the teacher educator provided a scavenger hunt sheet for students. This activity contained lists of the children's and young adult sections of the bookstore, broken down by the section headings found on the store shelves. For each section heading, there was a listing of excellent books and authors to be found there. Students were also asked to jot down the books they found exciting or trends they noticed in the different sections (see Appendices B and C).

For this activity, students were divided into teams and encouraged to talk and share with each other as they explored. When possible, the teacher educator recruited knowledgeable volunteers to serve as a resource in particular sections of the store. For example, having an expert on graphic novels was particularly helpful to encourage students to explore that genre, which is unfamiliar to many students. The teacher educator devoted most of her time to the Young Adult section, helping students find books that would captivate them and encourage them to read outside of their usual genres. A timer was used to indicate when it was time to move to another section; however, this practice was quickly abandoned, as the teacher educator noticed how well the students navigated through the sections without it.

Students spent approximately one and a half to two hours perusing the shelves. Most candidates gave themselves three to four weeks to read each book on their contract. Most students left the store with at least one book, and all left with a list of titles to order from their local library or on e-book. Students left in small groups, still chatting about their books and what they planned to read first. After this initial immersion into the exciting world of books, students left the store excited and ready to read.

### **Step 3: Continuing Reading Momentum throughout the Semester**

Since the fieldtrip occurred as class number 3 out of 15, the initial burst of excitement generated from immersion at the bookstore could be easily lost. Therefore, intentional steps were taken to extend the initial excitement so that it was maintained throughout the semester. To foster the momentum, the teacher educator implemented and promoted the following activities or behaviors in all subsequent classes: sustained silent reading, self-selected discussion, book talks, book passes/book looks, and recommendations.

**Sustained silent reading.** Each class session began with 10-15 minutes for students to read their novels. The teacher educator either read her own novel or circulated through the class to see what the students were reading. However, she did not engage them in discussion about their books at this time. Initially, students took a moment to settle down and start reading. However, they soon began

to look forward to this time – many commenting that they arrived to class early so they could have more time to read.

**Self-selected discussion.** Silent reading time was always followed by a 10–15 minute discussion period. Students were allowed to group themselves and were always given time to discuss whatever they wished about their novels. As the semester advanced, the teacher educator also added topics to be addressed, such as: character, theme, interesting leads, and amazing vocabulary. Again, students were allowed to group themselves, permitting them to discover the many similarities among seemingly very different books. For example, finding traits shared by a strong female character in a science fiction novel and in a historical fiction novel allowed them to see how students in a class can discuss the same big ideas while reading self-selected books. Each discussion period ended with a whole class conversation about some big ideas that students learned about themselves as readers and how those ideas apply to their teaching. These ideas included: reading a run of books in a particular series or genre before moving to a new one is normal, abandoning a book is acceptable (not all of them are worth finishing), reading outside of your comfort zone can lead to some exciting discoveries, and discussing books with friends is a fulfilling experience when the talk is real.

**Book talks.** Each of the remaining class periods focused on a particular genre. Each week, the teacher educator presented a book talk on one or two novels that were her favorites from that genre. Students skeptical about a particular genre were often willing to try a book based on her description. This was particularly important in helping students read outside of their comfort zones. Many of the female students in the class professed to hate science fiction; however, after a book talk highlighting the love story in a science fiction book, they were willing to try this genre and often became fans. Additionally, the teacher educator endeavored to bring examples of as many genres as possible in graphic novel format, as this was often new and intimidating to some students.

**Book passes/book looks.** For each genre studied, students brought in examples of novels or picture books that exemplified that genre. The teacher educator also brought 20 to 30 examples of that genre as well. Time was dedicated to either doing a book pass, in which books were passed around the classroom and each student had 50 seconds to peruse the book, or a book look, in which books were laid out on tables in the classroom and students had a designated amount of time at each table. During these activities, students created lists of books they wanted to read in the future. The majority of candidates indicated that this was the first time that they knew what they were going to read next, some indicating that they even had a pile of books stacked on their bedside table.

**Recommendations.** As fellow students began to know each other through their in-class discussion times, they began to recommend books to each other. The teacher



educator made recommendations to students as well. For example, one candidate was particularly taken by the *Uglies* series by Scott Westerfeld. The teacher educator found a graphic novel version of the story told from another character's perspective at a local book fair and brought it in to the student. The candidate took the book home and read it before the next class meeting. Her enthusiasm for the book spread to her tablemates, and they too began reading the series.

Students also made recommendations to the teacher educator. Because her comfort zone was Young Adult literature, they encouraged her to read their favorite adult novels: *The Help*, by Kathryn Stockett, and *My Sister's Keeper*, by Jodi Picoult. In order to honor and support their enthusiasm for reading, she read their recommendations and discussed the books with the recommenders.

### Student Response

#### Novel Contract

Each student was required to read four novels. The first semester that this procedure was implemented, there were 20 students in the course. If these 20 students each read a minimum of 4 books each, a total of 80 novels would have been read by the class. At the end of the semester, when the total number of novels actually read by each student was tallied, the class had read a total of 160 novels. In fact, only 2 of the 20 students had read the minimum, with the remaining 18 reading a range of novels between 5 and 14.

As part of the novel contract, students were required to read at least one novel outside of their comfort zone. At the beginning of the semester, students self-reported their favorite genres. Two students reported that historical fiction was their favorite, one reported realistic fiction, while no students listed science fiction or fantasy as their favorite. At the end of the semester, when the genres of the novels read was tallied, 20 historical fiction novels, 50 realistic fiction novels, 25 science fiction, and 45 fantasy books had been read by the class. Out of the 160 novels read, 60 were YA literature, while the rest were classified as early or middle grade texts.

#### Student Reflection

At the end of the semester, students were asked to reflect on their experience as readers over the course of the semester and post their responses on Blackboard. Students wrote prolifically about their journeys as readers over the course of the semester. Themes that emerged in many responses included: (a) reawakening as a reader; (b) development of readerly behavior; (c) the importance of class discussion and professor enthusiasm; and (d) how students felt the class had shaped, or reshaped, their behavior as readers and teachers.

**Reawakening as a reader.** Many students wrote of a love for reading as a child, but indicated that this love of pleasure reading had diminished over time. This was summed up succinctly by one student who stated, "Before this class, I had completely forgotten how important it is to take time and read for pleasure." Reasons given for the

relegation of pleasure reading included more demanding school work, with one student stating, "My undergraduate career of reading countless pages of textbook jargon turned me off to reading for pleasure." Another reason stated by many students was the busy pace of adult life. "As adults, I think we get wrapped up in our lives and how busy they are and forget how nice it is to just sit and read." One student stated that, though she loved to read as a child, she went through a long period without reading – attributing this to the fact that she was never able to read a book of her own choosing in school and was, therefore, never taught how to choose books which interested her. A large number of students indicated that the Children's Literature course reconnected them with their childhood love of books. One student captured this sentiment vividly:

I have this memory of myself as an 11-year-old, spending days in my room making my way through one Nancy Drew book after another. I begrudgingly went downstairs for meals and then ran back up to my room for more adventures. I can't quite devote the same number of hours to reading now with two kids and a job, but I am that excited about reading again! Thank you!

**Readerly behavior.** Students' comments revealed an understanding of readerly behaviors that they developed as a result of their time in this course. Many revealed that they did not know many book titles or authors at the beginning of the semester. One student commented, "Before this class, I was stuck with only the author I liked to read (Nicholas Sparks)." As a result of their immersion in books on the class fieldtrip, as well as through in-class experiences, students began to develop lists of authors and books that they wanted to read. One student comment captured this sentiment well, "I also have a list of books that I want to read now, which I NEVER had before." Another student revealed a horrifying moment when she realized that she did not have a book to read upon finishing the one she was reading. "For the first time in my life, not having another book to read was startling. My professor's words came to mind – we should always have a stack of books close by and we should always be planning what we will be reading next. I won't let that happen to me again!" Other students indicated that they were watching less television and visiting the book store more frequently. One confessed, "I even go on Friday nights sometimes. I just get excited to see what books are out and what books I can add to my ever growing list."

**Class discussion/professor enthusiasm.** Many students attributed their reawakened love of reading to the professor's enthusiasm about books. "What I loved about this class was that the professor continually discussed various kinds of books and made them seem exciting to read. As I began to read some of her suggestions, I found myself getting hooked back into reading." Students

also looked forward to discussions with classmates, one indicating that “discussions with my classmates made me more eager to read books.” Another stated, “I think one of the most important aspects of the experience was having the opportunity to discuss books with my fellow classmates.”

**New genres.** Students also indicated insight gained by the requirement to read one book outside of their comfort zones. One student indicated that she “mostly knew novels that [she] had read as a child and have now realized how many great new stories there are.” Many students were amazed at their love of science fiction in particular. Many students began their foray into this genre with the *Hunger Games*. One student loved it so much that, to her amazement, she finished it in three days. She stated, “Although it was not on my contract, I went out and bought the sequel, *Catching Fire*, and finished it in one day.” Unfortunately for her, *Mockingjay* had yet to be released at the time. Perhaps this reader captured the essence of her foray into new genres best when she stated, “It is amazing what you learn about yourself as a reader once you open your mind to new things!”

**New behaviors as readers and teachers.** Many students discussed how they felt or behaved as readers before the class and how these behaviors changed or evolved over the course of the semester. One student admitted that she “went from dreading to pick up a book, to having a list of books I have finished reading from the beginning of this semester and a pile of books sitting in my room waiting to be read.” Another shared, “This class has made me realize that I wasn’t a reader four months ago (even though I thought I was). I can now say with certainty that I am a reader and reading has changed my life.” Students began reclaiming time for pleasure reading in many ways, “I keep my book with me in my purse during the day and on my nightstand at night. When I’m sitting in my car with a few extra minutes, I pull out my book. Before going to bed at night I relax and read for ten minutes or so. All of those little minutes really add up and before I know it, the book is complete and I can’t wait to pick up the next one!”

Students also commented on how the effects on their personal reading lives transferred to their teaching practices. One student stated, “This class has shifted my thinking as a teacher. Though there is a tremendous amount of content to get through every day, a primary concern should be getting kids interested in books and having them read for an authentic purpose.” Another commented, “Now that I am an avid reader and am excited about it, I can show this excitement to students and get them hooked on reading. There were some great ideas presented in class that make reading fun and I cannot wait to try them out!”

They were also excited about the bond reading could forge between their students and themselves. After reading *Wake*, by Lisa McMann, a book outside of her comfort

zone, one student found an opportunity to discuss it with students at the school in which she was substitute teaching. “I was able to relate to the students and discuss the book! I think that helped to form a bond between me and the students I was working with.”

One student commented that, as a teacher, she now finds herself reading during silent reading time or during free periods. “I personally am reading because I want to, but I know that my students will see me reading and many will want to copy my behavior. This class has not only helped me become a more active reader, but has helped me teach my students how to become active and engaged readers.”

## Conclusion

This teaching protocol presents promising support for Applegate and Applegate’s (2004) findings that well-designed college courses can ignite the love of reading in teacher candidates. However, this model was implemented in just one course in a graduate program and the impact of its ability to enact sustainable change requires further study. In the same way that we encourage our teacher candidates to apply reading and writing across their curriculum, ideally, teacher candidates would encounter pieces of this model in multiple courses across their teacher preparation program. Being provided with the opportunity to develop and practice the habit of reading again and again would likely solidify sustainable change.

One of the teacher candidates in my class summed up the intent, the hope, and the power of this model with remarkable eloquence:

When we set up our classrooms to encourage [these kinds of] joyful connections with text – through book talks, book clubs, and other structures that encourage children to view themselves as a community of readers, by providing diverse literature in both reading level and genre, and by building in and prioritizing time for authentic reading – there is no stopping our students from reading.

Her statement applies equally well to college professors as it does to classroom teachers. As teacher educators, we must create teachers who feel that reading is an essential part of their personal lives. It is precisely when a deep love for reading has become so interwoven into their daily world that they can most effectively and truthfully transmit this passion for reading to their students. And it is precisely when a deep love for reading has become so interwoven into our daily lives as reading professors that we can most effectively and truthfully transmit this passion for reading to our own students.

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## Appendix A

### Chapter Book Contract

Title	
Author	
Genre	
Why this book?	
# of pages	
I will complete this novel by	

Student\_\_\_\_\_

Professor\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Directions for Bookstore Scavenger Hunt

Please visit each section noted on this form in the order indicated. We will have about 10-12 minutes in each section. As you visit each section, search for books that excite you! Look outside your favorite genre; you never know what you will find. I have made suggestions of what to look for at each section. Please make notes for a class discussion to be held in class next week.

## Appendix C

### Sample Section from Bookstore Scavenger Hunt

#### ➤ YA Lit

- Look at the New for Teens section
- Note the genres you notice for teens in this section
- Note the variety of topics you notice
- Look for titles and authors of interest to you

Here are just some of my favorite authors in this section:

- Walter Dean Myers
- Carolyn Mackler
- Suzanne Collins
- Scott Westerfeld
- Sharon Draper
- Laurie Halse Anderson
- Libba Bray
- Patricia McCormick
- K.L. Going
- Brian Green
- David Levithan